

THE
INVESTIGATORS
in
**THE MYSTERY OF THE
FEATHERED FIEND**



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An old acquaintance, Barbara Mathewson, sees a strange creature trespassing on her neighbour's property. She thinks the intruder is a 'bird-man', and engages The Three Investigators to uncover the mystery. However, the neighbour, Mr Faring, refuses their help. When one of his expensive aquariums is destroyed by the bird-man, Mr Faring goes into a frenzy. This is when Jupiter, Pete and Bob come in, and very soon, they discover that the notorious bird-man is actually a comic book character!

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of The Feathered Fiend

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Translated, adapted, and edited from:

Die drei ????: Der gefiederte Schrecken

(The Three ????: The Feathered Terror)

by

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(2014)

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(2022-05-18)

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1. An Old Acquaintance

“Terrible! It’s horrible!” The girl’s voice was filled with fear. “The creature has... it—” The sentence broke off.

The Three Investigators looked at each other, startled. First was the announcement from their answering machine that a message had come in at half past three early in the morning—and then this!

“You guys really need to help me!” the recording continued. “Please, I need your help!”

It beeped and the recording ended. “You have no further messages,” The Three Investigators heard the automated voice say.

“Fellas, this is most interesting!” said Jupiter.

“Interesting?” Pete shook his head. “Well, that’s frightening! Besides, I recognized the voice. That was—”

“Indeed,” interrupted the First Investigator. “It also struck me that the caller didn’t give her name because she was obviously caught in a state of panic.”

Bob rolled his eyes. “Don’t talk so pompously, Jupe. That was our friend Barbara Mathewson and she asked us for help. Come on, let’s call her back!” He rummaged in his address book and quickly found what he was looking for. “Here’s her number!”

Bob dialled. Impatiently, he waited as the other end rang.

Three times... Four times... Five times.

“She’s not answering,” he informed his friends. “I hope nothing happened to her. She sounded really frightened on the phone.”

Barbara Mathewson, a girl about their age, was well remembered by The Three Investigators. Some time ago, she had commissioned them to investigate the case of a stolen parchment book. However, they had not been satisfied with the involvement of their client, as she had interfered again and again, quite tangibly, during the investigation. As annoying as she was, she was interesting at the same time.

Eight times... Nine times... Ten times.

Bob hung up. “I can’t reach her. What are we going to do?”

It was Friday, and the end of the school week was only a few hours ago. The Three Investigators had been looking forward to a cosy evening.

The three friends were gathered in an old mobile home trailer, which was the headquarters of their investigation agency. This trailer was located at The Jones Salvage Yard that was owned and operated by Jupiter’s uncle Titus and aunt Mathilda.

To keep their trailer away from prying eyes, The Three Investigators had covered it with scrap metal and other junk. Access to the trailer was only by secret passages. Inside, the three boys had furnished their office with assembled and repaired items obtained from the salvage yard over time. They had also installed equipment needed for their investigation work—a computer, telephone with a fax machine, an answering machine, a photocopier and even a small crime laboratory. Along the wall were shelves that housed hundreds of magazines and newspapers, and numerous folders containing documents and reports of their previous cases.

Bob had just tried unsuccessfully to contact Barbara, and before the three of them could think about their next steps, Aunt Mathilda’s voice echoed through the balmy afternoon air:

“Juupeeterrr!”

As the skylight of their trailer was open, The Three Investigators heard her very clearly.

“Juupeeterrr!” called Aunt Mathilda again. She was probably going to make them clean up the salvage yard as always. They really didn’t have time for that after the mysterious phone call!

“Juupeeterrr!” sounded from outside.

“Sounds pretty energetic.” Pete drummed his fingers on the table.

“Pete!” thundered Mathilda’s voice.

“One more name to come—” the First Investigator began.

However, his aunt beat him to it. “Bob! Are you here?”

The next moment, a whistle blew.

The Three Investigators looked at each other. “That wasn’t your aunt,” Pete said.

A girl’s voice yelled: “Hey, guys!”

“That is Barbara,” Jupiter said, puzzled. “No wonder we couldn’t reach her.” His voice sounded like a mixture of anticipation and despair.

Jupiter opened the trailer door and crept along a short dark tunnel of corrugated sheet metal that led to the main secret entrance known as the Cold Gate. This was a discarded refrigerator where the back wall could be pushed aside to get to the front door and then out to the salvage yard.

Jupiter opened the fridge door a gap to check that no one was watching. Then he went out to the salvage yard, followed by Pete and Bob.

Again they heard the shrill whistle. When Jupe turned round a pile of junk, he looked into the face of a girl. She was about to whistle again with two fingers.

“Barbara!” exclaimed Jupiter. “We’ve just listened to your recorded message. What happened? I hope you’re all right!”

Their visitor lowered her hands. She had dark circles under her eyes. The freckles on her nose looked pale. Only her clothes were as colourful as ever. She wore a lemon yellow, airy dress. Printed on the fabric were hand-sized cornflowers that looked like a preschool-aged child had stamped them on. On her head sat a brown baseball cap.

“How good of you to come out,” Barbara said with relief. “I was beginning to think you couldn’t hear me. Your aunt has been calling you, Jupiter. She really is a lovely woman! I like her.” Barbara turned to Bob. “And she also called you, Robert.” For the first time she smiled.

“Um...” Bob didn’t quite know what to say. “How about you call me Bob, as with everyone else?”

“Oh, that’s right! I just always think your real name is Robert. Nicknames are so childish somehow and that’s why—”

“It’s okay,” Pete interrupted, preferring to hear what had happened earlier in the morning. “We understand.”

“I know you understand!” Barbara’s grey-green eyes seemed almost dreamy all at once. “I noticed that the first time we met.”

Pete remembered all too well that Barbara had been hopelessly infatuated with him during their last case together.

Jupiter crossed his arms. The conversation was getting on his nerves tremendously because there was a much more important topic. “Now tell us... what’s wrong?”

Barbara took off her cap and shook her head like a wet dog such that the brown curls just flew around her somewhat chubby face. “I hope you don’t have an important case to work on

right now." She looked around hurriedly. At this moment, she looked more like the girl who had left a panicked message on The Three Investigators' answering machine.

"Your question was a pleonasm. Every case we work is important," Jupiter clarified.
"That goes without saying."

"Aha..." Barbara wrapped the tips of a few curls around her index finger.

Jupiter cleared his throat. "It's clear from your reaction that you don't know what I mean. A pleonasm is the use of more words than are needed to describe something. An example of this is the 'hot water heater'. It's a heater so its function would be to make things hot, so the word 'hot' in 'hot water heater' is redundant. Also, you can see it as a heater for 'hot water', but 'hot water' does not need heating! It's already hot!"

"Please, Jupe," Pete interrupted him. "This is not the topic of interest right now!"

"Thank you," Barbara said and winked at Pete. Her anxiety seemed to fall away from her for a moment. "He's still so fond of giving impassioned lectures on completely uninteresting subjects, isn't he?"

Pete had to laugh. "Some things just never change—which makes me wonder why you don't have your favourite pouch."

She looked at him as if he had paid her a huge compliment. "Sure I have!" She fiddled around in the neckline of her dress and pulled out a thin leather cord. Hanging from it was a brown pouch, the kind that had been in fashion a few decades ago. "This thing is just so handy and no pickpocket can get at it."

"Handy?" muttered Bob. "Actually, another word comes to mind..."

Jupiter gave him a punishing look. "Now cut out the talk! Barbara, why did you ask us for help?"

"Certainly not because of water heaters, hot or otherwise." The pouch now dangled in front of her dress. A little, Barbara looked like she'd stepped out of a crazy fashion magazine that was at least thirty years old. "In fact, it does have to do with animals... with fish! And with..." She lowered her voice. "... With a creature!"

"Yeah, you said something about a creature on our answering machine," Bob said, "and now we finally want to know more!"

"In short, I have a new case for the four of us to work on!"

"Four of us? That sounds really good, Barbara." But Jupiter didn't sound convinced.

"At least up to the part about the fish!" added Pete. "But let's stick with The Three Investigators... if... or perhaps I should say, if we take this case, you'll be our client, no more. The investigative work is up to us."

"Sure thing!" Now Barbara didn't sound convinced.

"So what's the deal with the fish?" Bob wanted to know. "And about the—"

"—The creature?" asked Barbara. "Perhaps that was the wrong word. Possibly creepy monster fits better... or ugly freak... or bird-man..." She would probably have come up with a dozen other descriptions had Aunt Mathilda not appeared at that moment.

"Have you all finished your chat?" she asked. "I have a fresh cherry pie ready, just out of the oven. Come along, if you want some! Come on! Let's go to the kitchen now!"

Nobody says no to Aunt Mathilda's cherry pie. Bob led the way to the Jones family home—a two-storey house situated just outside the salvage yard, with a small gate separating them. Pete had Barbara glued to his side. Behind was Jupiter and his aunt.

Mathilda turned reproachfully to the First Investigator. "Why didn't you tell me you were expecting a visitor, Jupe? It was sheer luck that I just baked a cherry pie."

"Uh..." Jupe mumbled. "Actually we didn't know she was coming."

“Quite a lovely girl, your friend,” Mathilda continued. “Somehow she looks familiar. Hasn’t she been here before?”

“She has,” Jupiter agreed, “and actually, we have something important to discuss!” He was always up for a good pie, after all—but when he wasn’t lecturing on hot water heaters himself, any further delay annoyed him.

Fish and a creature... a monster... or a... bird-man? How was that supposed to go together? Some animal-like creature that ate precious fish? No, that sounded too strange. Jupiter was dying to know more!

2. The Bird-Man

The cherry pie tasted delicious, of course—as always. However, only one of The Three Investigators enjoyed it properly. Jupiter waited far too eagerly for Barbara’s report. Pete didn’t feel comfortable in his skin because Barbara was obviously getting too close to him. Only Bob seemed to have completely forgotten about the strange creature and calmly ate a second, then a third piece of the pie.

Soon, Aunt Mathilda finished meddling around the kitchen. Only when she had left did Jupiter breathe a sigh of relief. “At last we can talk about the burning issue!” he said.

Barbara smiled wryly. “The Pisces guy’s house has more water than air! At least, there is no risk of fire there.”

“What are you talking about?” Bob asked. “Who’s the Pisces guy? Didn’t you say it was about a bird-man?”

The girl pricked a cherry with her fork. “You’re mixing things up there.”

“No wonder, given the obvious lack of basic information!” the First Investigator stated in his typical screwed way. “Now, tell us all we need to know in an orderly fashion.”

“Yes,” Pete agreed. “Then we need to decide whether there is a case at all.”

“Of course there is!” Barbara indignantly declared. “—Otherwise I wouldn’t be here.”

“What we’ve learned so far sounds quite mysterious,” Jupe said hesitantly. “Since we have nothing better to do at the moment anyway... we could basically take on Barbara’s case. After all, we didn’t regret it back in the ‘parchment book’ case either! So, please get to the point!”

“Gladly,” said Barbara. “You know my family isn’t exactly poor.”

The Three Investigators nodded. They remembered the visit to the noble house of Barbara’s family. Her father was a professor of history, specializing in the European Middle Ages.

“Compared to our neighbour Mr Faring, though, we’re like beggars,” Barbara continued. “Really, he’s filthy rich—like an oil sheik... and he’s got a soft spot for fish, if you can even call it a soft spot.”

“Does he have a pond?” asked Jupiter. “Or an aquarium?”

“Aquarium is right,” Barbara said. “Not one, though, but quite a few. Only one of them is —” She interrupted herself, and made a sweeping motion with both arms. “It’s absolutely huge! I’ve never seen it myself, but everyone in our neighbourhood knows the story. Zachariah Faring didn’t put the aquarium in the living room or the hobby room or anything. He planned the whole house around it! Get the picture? First came the aquarium, then the house around it.”

“Sounds a bit bizarre,” Jupiter admitted.

Bob had pulled out a pen to take notes. “Why don’t you start by telling us exactly what happened to your neighbour?”

“With the Pisces guy,” Pete added with a grin.

Barbara did not answer immediately. She reached with her right hand for the pouch that had been dangling in front of her dress all this time. “I-I saw something in his backyard... that... that horrible creature—the bird-man.”

“When?” asked Jupiter.

“Very early this morning, about 3 am or so,” Barbara said. “When I woke up and went to the bathroom, I looked out my window and saw something flash—with glowing, treacherous eyes. The figure moved and finally came into the light of the street lamp. It was horrible! It looked like a human, but it had two huge wings with yellow feathers on its arms! And the face—there... there wasn’t one! Just this huge, hard beak and dark spots around the cruel eyes...”

The Three Investigators quickly exchanged glances. Jupiter kept a lookout to see if his aunt had returned. It was better if Aunt Mathilda didn’t hear about this conversation.

“That’s when I called you right away,” Barbara continued. “It was obvious that no one would be at your headquarters in the middle of the night... but I was so excited! I’m sure I was just talking nonsense.”

“You’ve only given cryptic hints in a panicky state, yes,” the First Investigator said.

“Because I was just so shocked! I didn’t have time to think about it or get my head back together.”

“Did this...” Pete cleared his throat and restarted. “Did the bird-man attack someone? Or damaged your neighbour’s house?”

“Maybe ate some valuable fish?” asked Bob, not taking the matter quite so seriously.

“No,” Barbara said, “but...”

“Then this is not yet a case,” Jupiter clarified, “much as I regret that.”

Barbara opened the pouch, but took out not money, but a feather. It was about as long as an outstretched index finger and shimmered yellow. Only at the base was it greenish. “I found this just outside Mr Faring’s gate. Now, don’t you think I imagined the bird-man.”

Jupiter took the feather and turned it thoughtfully between his thumb and forefinger. It didn’t look like anything special. At first glance, Jupiter couldn’t even tell if it was artificial or real. “Hmm...” he murmured. “Could be from some bird—”

“Did you immediately get this feather?” asked Bob.

“Are you crazy?” Barbara squeaked. “While there was this... this thing running around?”

“Good point,” Pete said.

The First Investigator gave another ‘hmm...’

“I’d like to examine the feather closely,” Bob said. “Can I keep it for a while?”

“Sure,” Barbara replied.

Bob took the feather and pocketed it.

“Anyway, I’ve never found a feather like that on our property,” Barbara continued. “It came from that creature! And I think that’s enough a reason for you to take this case. I, for one, won’t be able to sleep soundly if you don’t. So please, just come along and have a look. Otherwise, I’ll think of some excuse to lure you there. Believe me, I’ll think of something...”

The Three Investigators did not doubt that for a second. “All right,” Jupiter finally said. “Let’s go take a look!”

3. Aquatic Animal Rescue

The scream was blood-curdling. The next instant, the door of the house flew open. A pale man in linen trousers and a silk shirt looked around hurriedly. That must be him, Jupiter thought—Barbara's neighbour Zachariah Faring—the Pisces guy.

The Three Investigators had accompanied Barbara, who had come to The Jones Salvage Yard on her bicycle, to her father's house in a posh Rocky Beach neighbourhood.

Just then, they stopped in front of the wall of ornately hewn stone that surrounded the Mathewsons' huge property. If their lawn was the size of a football field, they could fit an entire stadium on their neighbour's... and while Barbara's family home was an old, stately mansion, the modern building next door, with its glass façades and metal struts, looked like a swank building. Surrounding the property was a meticulously trimmed hedge that reached almost to the shoulders of the four of them.

In front of the neighbouring house, the pale man was now gesticulating wildly with his arms. "Help!" he called over to them. "Quick, help me! Help!" He flung himself about and rushed back into the house.

The Three Investigators and their companion didn't need to be asked twice. They swung off their bikes and sped off. Only Pete had the presence of mind to stay seated and cycled a few more metres. So he raced past his friends and was the first to arrive at the wrought-iron gate.

Pete braked so sharply in front of the gate that the rear wheel slipped sideways. He jumped off the bike and jiggled the gate handle. Unfortunately, it was locked. The excited Mr Faring hadn't thought of unlocking the gate when he called for help.

The Second Investigator peered through the bars, and saw a driveway that led up to the garage next to the house. The garage door was closed, unlike the door into the house. In the meantime, the others had come up to him.

"What's going on?" asked Jupiter.

"Somehow, I have to get in!" Pete moved back a distance from the gate, took a running start, jumped, and got a grip on the top of the gate. His groping foot found the latch to brace himself. Then he pulled himself up.

The Second Investigator was about to swing over the gate when a piercing buzz sounded. There was a clack and the gate swung open inward. The sudden jolt caused him to lose his footing. He slipped, but somehow managed to cling on to the gate to keep himself from falling. He didn't look particularly elegant doing it. Bob, then Barbara and finally Jupiter ran past him. He then leaped to the ground and hurried down the driveway with a racing heartbeat.

The lawn all around was perfectly manicured, as were the rose beds in glorious bloom and the bushes trimmed into animal shapes. There was something odd about them, but Pete didn't get to look at them more closely.

What could have happened in the house? Was the bird-man involved? But then why would the neighbour rush back into the house instead of fleeing? Did he need to give someone a hand?

Pete raced past all his friends and was almost at the door when he heard a crunch and gurgle from inside. What could that mean? The Second Investigator ran into the house and crossed a hallway to an open door.

Pete glared at the utter chaos. The noble carpet was not only wet, but the water accumulated to huge puddles, which was slowly getting bigger. Between them were shards of glass and the huge fragment of a...

Yeah, what was that? The splinter of a glass wall? A broken thick window pane?

Pete didn't realize until he saw what else was wriggling on the floor to the right and left of the large vase.

That was fish! They were struggling on the floor. There, a crab crawled through one of the deeper puddles. Next to it lay a spiky, rusty-brown ball and a colourful but slumped something that looked like jelly.

A large aquarium in one corner of the room had shattered, spilling not only the water, but the aquatic animals onto the floor! Its glass walls were nothing but sad, jagged remains. Two other aquariums stood to the right and left of it—both completely intact.

The Three Investigators didn't get to look around any further, because every second counted for the fish and the other aquatic animals.

"Help me!" cried Zachariah Faring. With clasped hands, he plucked a wriggling fish from the floor and carried it carefully across the room. "We've got to get these animals into that other tank over there quick, or they'll die!" He pointed to the aquarium on the right-hand side.

He lifted the fish over the intact aquarium and dropped it in. "I don't know if they'll survive anyway. Quick! And be careful! You take the fish, I'll take care of the others. Some of them aren't even allowed to come up for air and you have to handle them properly." There was panic in his voice.

The Three Investigators and Barbara tried to grab the fish and move them to the aquarium on the right side. Zachariah Faring hurried out of the room. When he returned a moment later, the four member rescue team had already moved many of the sea creatures to safety.

Mr Faring held a measuring cup in his hand. With it he scooped water from the intact aquarium and walked with smacking steps to the small red spiked ball on the floor. A shard of glass broke under his shoe. "The sea urchin," he said softly. "I hope it survived."

In Bob's hands, a fish was wriggling so hard that it threatened to slip out between his fingers. That was why he didn't aim for the aquarium where they had put the rescued animals so far, but for the third one, because it was much closer. However, it was closed with a lid, which Bob noticed much too late.

"Stop! Stop!" cried Zachariah Faring. "Are you out of your mind? That's the wrong aquarium!"

"Uh... I thought—" Bob took a few more steps toward the open aquarium on the right. He managed to hold onto the fish, and finally, this rescued animal splashed into the water as well.

"You're not thinking!" Mr Faring scolded as he collected some snails from large puddles and dropped them into the tank. They were the last animals to be saved. "There's fresh water in the closed aquarium, not salt water!"

"I thought water was just water," Bob said meekly.

"How about I expose you to the poison gas atmosphere on Mercury sometime soon," Barbara's neighbour said, "then you'll find out that not all air is the same... and the same goes for water!"

Jupiter was already standing next to the destroyed aquarium. He wanted to examine it to find out how the glass walls could have broken. Now he turned his attention to Mr Faring. “I’m afraid I have to correct you on that, sir. Mercury has no atmosphere at all in the true sense of the word. It’s rather like our moon in that respect, which—”

“That was just an example,” snapped Zachariah Faring.

“Anyway...” Barbara interjected, “you’re pretty rude considering we just helped you save your animals!”

Mr Faring opened his mouth to say something back... but closed it again. He blinked a few times. “You’re right about that. So I do apologize... and thank you for your help.” It didn’t sound particularly sincere. He pounded out the words far too quickly and gruffly for that.

“Apology accepted,” Bob said, though he was still angry.

“Who are you guys, anyway?” Mr Faring looked Barbara in the face. “I think I’ve seen you before, haven’t I?”

“I’m your neighbour,” Barbara said indignantly. “We live—”

“Sure, the little ras—” interrupted Mr Faring, clearing his throat. “The little Mathewson,” he said at last. “Then it’s a good thing you haven’t far to go home. Your dress has got all wet. You ought to change your clothes.”

Barbara looked down at herself. “No wonder, kneeling on this carpet.” The puddles glistened in the bluish light that fell on the floor from the ceiling. “Fixing all this up isn’t going to be cheap.”

“That’s not a problem,” Zachariah Faring said quickly.

“Maybe not that,” Jupiter said, “but I have a completely different problem. How could this aquarium break?”

“And that, my boy, is not your problem,” Barbara’s neighbour clarified, “because it’s none of your business at all.”

“I’m still curious,” Jupiter insisted, “and I’m convinced we can help you. After all, my friends and I are investigators, and this looks like a deliberate act of destruction.”

Jupiter took out one of their business cards and held it out to Mr Faring. The card said:



Mr Faring took the card but he didn’t even look at it. Instead, he said: “That’s right... but honestly, I couldn’t care less. Please go now.”

“Just like that?” Barbara snapped, pulling her baseball cap lower over her forehead. “You called for help, we’re—”

“Yeah, yeah, all right. Wait, I’ll give you a few dollars.”

“That’s not the point. We—” Barbara broke off as Mr Faring, without turning to her, went out of the room.

Four of them stayed behind and for the first time, they had a chance to look around more closely. One side of the room was completely glazed, but only a little brightness fell in

because the window panes were tinted. Most of the light came from the lamps above the aquariums.

The walls all around were almost completely covered—either by the three aquariums or by numerous bookshelves. These were filled to bursting with comic books. Bob let his gaze wander over the collection. “There must be thousands of them.”

“Tens of thousands,” Jupiter corrected. “Just look at them, some of them are in two rows on the shelves... and believe me, I’m a good judge of these things! I’ve even won a contest guessing the number of beans in a jar...”

“You’re good at bragging too,” Barbara said nonchalantly.

Jupiter pinched his lower lip. He found himself enjoying talking to Barbara more and more as it challenged him. “What you call bragging is simply the truth... and a good investigator is always committed to the truth.”

They did not get to speak further on the subject as Mr Faring returned. He was holding some dollar bills in his hand. “You can use this and go get a burger at McDougal’s or whatever those awful places are called. Thank goodness, I don’t have to step foot in any of them.” He shook himself.

Although the four wouldn’t take the money, Barbara’s neighbour pressed it into their hands and then pushed them out the front door.

While walking down the driveway towards the gate, Pete remarked: “Just fancy that! Even if he has never set foot in a fast food joint, he doesn’t even know the name of the famous restaurant chain. Doesn’t that strike you as odd?”

Jupiter agreed. “This Mr Faring does seem to be odd as well as obnoxious. Well, we’ll see how we can handle him as a client.”

“—Except he didn’t seem to have any interest in hiring The Three Investigators,” Barbara clarified, “so you can hardly call him your client, even though he was the victim of a crime.”

“I’m afraid you’re right, Barbara,” the First Investigator admitted. “One thing’s for sure though—aquariums don’t just break... and certainly not the day after a strange mysterious creature shows up!”

When the four of them approached the gate, it opened automatically.

Barbara whistled to herself in good humour. “Look, Pete, it’s open. You can save any breakneck moves, although your stunt performance was really good. If it had worked, I’d love to have a photo of it.”

Pete refrained from answering.

“Mr Faring is not a very friendly chap,” Jupiter observed.

“The Pisces guy is obnoxious all right,” Barbara confirmed just as they walked through the gate.

There was a clack and from a speaker below the bell, Mr Faring’s voice rang out: “So says the daughter of a history buff, of all people... and yes, I can hear you as long as the gate is open.”

Barbara gasped for breath and fanned herself with hasty movements of her left hand. “Now I welcome you all to my house,” she said, “unlike the Pisces guy!” She shouted the last word rather loudly. “I know what’s proper. You’ll get a drink from me... and that’s without you helping me save my pets’ lives first!”

The Three Investigators suppressed a giggle, after all, Barbara was their client... or friend... or whatever.

The gate slammed shut behind them. Pete grabbed his bike, which had fallen over, and pushed it to the Mathewsons’ property.

“We should probably—” the Second Investigator began, but Barbara didn’t let him finish. She hooked onto him, which left Pete speechless for a few seconds, and pulled him along with her.

“Besides, I have something important to show you,” she said. “It may be a clue! We agree that someone broke in and smashed the fish tank, right?”

“And that was just before Mr Faring discovered the mess,” Pete added, “otherwise the animals would have died long ago.”

The Second Investigator walked more briskly than Barbara, so he managed to shake the girl off. After that, he took care to keep his arms close to his body. “What clue are you talking about?” he asked.

She grinned, and with the dress wet at the knees she looked more than ever like a mischievous, slightly overgrown child. “Maybe I have it all on video!”

4. Captured on Video

“You have something on video?” asked Jupiter, puzzled. “I have to admit, you’re full of surprises.”

“Of course,” Barbara said as she led The Three Investigators through the garden to her family’s house. “I’m Barbara Mathewson, and I’m full of surprises!” Then she laughed like a bell and ran off with her dress fluttering.

At the front door, she was still rummaging for her key when the door opened. A man in his mid-forties greeted her. It was her father, Professor Mathewson.

When the professor saw The Three Investigators, he smiled. “Well, I’m glad to see you again. Don’t tell me one of your cases brought you here? I just hope Barbara didn’t have anything to do with it.”

“Oh, Dad!” She tilted her head slightly and opened her eyes wide. “They just want to come and visit me.”

“You’re welcome,” Barbara’s father said. “Come on in, boys.”

Barbara led The Three Investigators to her room. Only then did it occur to them that they had never been here before.

The room was in the attic. A small desk stood under the sloping roof, where three large windows let in light. The desk was almost completely taken up by a computer. On the wall opposite was a poster showing a cube-shaped spaceship with strange superstructures hovering in front of a giant yellow-red planet.

Barbara obviously noticed Pete eyeing the poster. “I like science fiction,” she said. “I think it’s cool, even though it’s mostly a boy thing.”

The walls were painted an incredibly garish grass-green colour. On the shelves were withered plants that would have done credit to any desert.

Jupiter spotted the most remarkable detail and inconspicuously showed it to his friends. Next to the desk hung a picture frame, only there was no picture in it, but a newspaper clipping. It was a report describing the successful solving of an age-old jewel robbery. That was the case involving The Three Investigators, and it was also when Barbara first met them. On the side of the frame was the boys’ infamous business card.

“Obviously this case meant a lot to you at the time,” Pete said.

She nodded hastily. “It was the most exciting thing I’ve ever experienced! And now I can finally work with you guys again!”

She seemed so happy that The Three Investigators didn’t contradict her this time. Instead, Jupiter asked: “So what makes you think you have on video the break-in at your neighbour’s house, if there even was one?”

“Quite simple. You know that a thief broke into our house that time. After that, my dad bought an alarm system—some expensive thing with all kinds of bells and whistles, including some video cameras that monitor the property. After I saw the bird-man over at the Pisces guy’s place yesterday and found the feather this morning, I positioned a camera at his place right away.”

Bob laughed appreciatively. “So you recorded what happened over at Mr Faring’s property!”

Barbara beamed with eagerness. "Unfortunately, only part of the garden and the area of the front door, although that's quite far away and therefore quite indistinct."

"You do know that you're not supposed to do that, don't you?" asked Jupiter. "It's an invasion of Mr Faring's privacy."

Barbara waved it off as if it didn't matter at all. "All I care about is the monstrosity... and maybe now we'll have the intruder who destroyed the fish tank on the surveillance video. That would be cool, don't you think?"

"Can we look at the recording?" asked the Second Investigator.

Barbara booted up her computer. It made a few beeping sounds. "I've paired it with the computer. That way we can play everything back easily."

"Amazing," Bob agreed. "You know your stuff pretty well, and I'll bet that setup wasn't cheap."

She beamed even more. "There must be some advantage coming from a rich family."

Barbara quickly clicked through some programs and files before an unfortunately rather blurry video clip played. It showed the neighbouring property and a part of Mr Faring's house. At the bottom of the screen was the time—11:17 am.

"That's way too early." Jupe looked at his watch. "It's now 6:12 pm. Does anyone know exactly what time we went into Mr Faring's house just now? The fish tank was smashed maybe five minutes before, more likely less. The intruder—I stress again, if there is one—may have entered the house some time before."

They kept clicking until 4:00 pm was displayed at the bottom of the video. After that, they let the video run at increased speed.

"Stop!" said Barbara after a few minutes.

"That's right," Jupiter agreed. "There was actually something there."

"I'm good," Barbara said with satisfaction. She sounded as if nothing could shake that opinion, and she certainly didn't lack self-confidence.

They clicked back a little, then let the video run at normal speed. Just then a bird flew through the picture.

"Is that what you meant?" asked Pete. "Well, only the man's missing."

"What do you mean?" asked Bob.

"Well... that was a bird, but where's the man?" Pete replied. "I thought it was a bird-man. Get it?"

"That's not funny," Bob complained.

"There was something else!" said Barbara. "Wait for it. It must be coming."

Her patience was rewarded. As the video jumped to 4:25 pm, someone walked into the picture—slowly and deliberately, not guiltily or cautiously like a criminal. They saw a figure march confidently to the house. Was it the creature?

"Gosh! It is a bird-man," Pete gasped.

The creature looked just as Barbara had described it. He walked upright like a human, but had two large yellow wings under his arms. The feathers on his body were green. The bird-man had his head thrust forward, and a pointed beak curved in front of his face. Where his eyes should be, there were only two dark blue, menacing spots.

The figure was only visible for about three seconds, then it disappeared from the camera's field of vision.

"Stop!" cried Jupiter. "Go back again."

Barbara grabbed the computer mouse. Shortly afterwards, the video program jumped back a few moments and the bird-man appeared again.

They ran the spot several more times, but could not see anything more specific. One thing, however, was certain—the bird-man had been there. Now they could get a picture of him, even if it was blurred.

“Stop the playback,” Bob demanded.

Barbara did so. The still picture now showed the sinister figure, even more blurred than during when there was movement, but that was the only way they could examine closer.

“The bird-man is not far from the front door,” said Jupiter. “So we can make a comparison and say with certainty that he’s about the same size as a normal human.”

“That’s the first thing that comes to mind when you see that?” asked Pete.

“Well, I’m also thinking about the interesting colouring of his feathers,” the First Investigator replied.

Pete could think of nothing more to say. Instead, he eyed the strange creature with a sense of unease. The image was indistinct and roughly pixelated, so the details were not exactly visible. That made it seem even more sinister.

“The feather Barbara found is probably from the wings... maybe from the base, because it’s a little green in the lower part. Let’s look at everything very carefully, because every detail can be important. Unfortunately, you can’t see it that well.”

“One thing strikes me...” said Bob, “the fingers are clenched into fists.”

“If the bird-man has fingers at all,” Barbara interjected.

The First Investigator turned to her and smiled almost a little pityingly. “Barbara... unless someone convinces me otherwise, I’m going to assume this is a human in disguise. So, of course he has fingers!”

“Uh... yeah right.” Barbara didn’t sound particularly convinced. “Still, I was scared last night. In the dark, that creature just seemed real—like a monster.”

Bob said: “I hear you fine. When there’s four of us in a bright room, some things seem different than when you’re alone in the dark.” He pointed to the screen. “Can you print out the picture of the creature?”

“Sure.”

It took only seconds for a printer to start rattling under the desk. Bob bent down to remove the paper. He looked at it with satisfaction. “I don’t know what you guys are up to, but I’m going to check this out. I’ll go back to Headquarters and scour the Internet for this character! Maybe it has shown up somewhere before or—”

“You can do that from here,” Barbara suggested.

Bob shook his head. “I like to be undisturbed when I’m checking on things, you know. I have my ways, Barbara.”

“I think that’s good,” said Jupiter. “Pete and I need to do something as well. We’ll speak to Mr Faring again.”

Pete raised his shoulders. “What makes you think he’s going to welcome us with open arms?”

“We’ll think of something to get his attention. I want to ask him about this bird-man, and I’m eager to see his reaction.”

“What about me?” asked Barbara. “What am I supposed to do in the meantime?”

“You prepare everything here,” Jupiter answered without hesitation. He had expected Barbara’s question, and had thought of an answer. “You need to talk to your father. We need to lie in wait in your house or somewhere on your property.”

“When?”

“Well, from the second we return from Mr Faring... and then for the entire night.” Jupiter made a sweeping gesture with his hand. “Sleep is overrated anyway. Pete and I have

to keep an eye on Mr Faring's house. We'll take turns throughout the night. Pete, you'll have to check with your parents. I'll call home too. The bird-man will be back sooner or later and we can't miss him then."

"What if he doesn't show up today?" asked Barbara.

"Then we'll attempt again tomorrow!" promised Jupiter, which made Barbara beam again. She ran a hand over the bridge of her freckled nose.

5. Bob Makes a Discovery

The Three Investigators said goodbye and left the house. Bob swung on his bike as Jupiter and Pete went to the gate of Mr Faring's property and rang the bell.

It was only a few seconds before a 'Yes?' buzzed from the loudspeaker.

"Mr Faring, please excuse the interruption," the First Investigator said artfully. "It's me, Jupiter Jones. We were here earlier—"

"I know," Barbara's neighbour interrupted. "You and your friends helped me. Thank you and that's it. It's all taken care of. I have other things to attend to."

Jupiter thought for a moment and improvised: "That's why we are here again. Maybe we can continue to help you." There was no response, so the First Investigator just kept talking: "Besides, we wanted to know if all the animals survived."

"Not all of them, but almost," Zachariah Faring explained glumly. "Fortunately, the damage is contained. And now—"

"We are very interested in your fish and other aquatic specimens," Jupiter continued unperturbed. It wasn't hard for him to just keep talking. It was one of the things he was really good at. "Barbara told us that you have quite a large aquarium."

"Okay, Barbara, then tell your father to do a better job of raising his daughter so that she doesn't go off to meet some random—"

"Excuse me, sir, Barbara is not with us," Jupiter interrupted. "I just came with my friend Pete."

"Yeah, uh, because... I'm also a big fan of salt-water animals," Pete added.

"Weren't you trying to throw a sea fish into the freshwater aquarium earlier?"

"That was our friend Bob," explained the Second Investigator. How convenient. "He's already gone home because, unlike us, he's just not interested in aquatic matters."

"We, on the other hand, are passionate about aquatics," Jupiter interjected. "Personally, I'm always fascinated by brittle stars. How big are your largest Ophiuroidea?"

That obviously impressed Mr Faring. "All right, otherwise I can't get rid of you. I guess I owe it to you for your help. So come on in, I'll show you my big aquarium... but only for fifteen minutes."

Pete and Jupiter thanked him artfully, then there was the familiar clack and the gate swung inward. The Second Investigator watched and said: "Save any remarks, Jupe!"

As they made their way towards the house, far enough away from the intercom microphone, Jupiter whispered: "So, you're an aquatic enthusiast? That sounds good, Pete. Could have been from me."

Pete grinned. "You stick with your 'Ofiridium'."

"Ophiuroidea," the First Investigator said. "That's the animal class of which brittle stars belong to. They are closely related to the starfish and—"

"Okay, that's enough, Jupe," Pete interrupted the lecture. "I'm not surprised you know your way around animal classes."

They walked on in silence. Now Pete realized what had struck him as so strange about the ornamental bushes in the garden. They were cut in the shape of various sea creatures, such as fish or seahorses. He even saw a dolphin.

This was a truly whimsical building. He was all the more curious to see what else awaited him in the house.

Bob sat in the headquarters of The Three Investigators and was completely absorbed in his search for information. Outside it had become dusk by now and he had not switched on the light in the trailer. Only the computer screen provided some brightness. That was enough to find a bag of chips now and then and reach into it.

Bob didn't think there was so much to read about this crazy subject. First he came across an article that accurately described the way of life of the so-called bird people. He already believed that there was a species of animal that was actually called that, until he noticed that it was about made-up characters in a computer game and the description didn't fit Barbara's description and the figure captured on video.

Bob found more about hybrid beings that were half human and half animal. In Thai mythology, for example, such a creature had even made it onto the national coat of arms, but even that looked completely different from the creature from Mr Faring's garden.

Bob clicked and clicked and read through numerous websites and newspaper articles. Again and again, he came across fantasy novels of some kind. He tried encyclopedia entries and the online library directory of Ruxton University, where he had access. There he discovered a lot of books on ornithology—the study of birds... but nowhere did he find anything that helped him.

In his search, he used terms like 'bird-man', 'bird creature', 'human-bird hybrid', 'avian humanoid', and also short phrases like 'humans disguised as birds'.

As a result, he was shown not only a lot of references, but also a bar with thumbnail images.

Bob couldn't believe his eyes. Hastily he pulled his hand out of the chip bag to click on one of the images. The bag slipped off the table, the contents falling onto his pants and onto the floor. He barely noticed.

Bob whistled softly through his teeth as he saw what the screen was displaying. This couldn't be a coincidence...

6. The Gigantic Aquarium

Zachariah Faring proved to be not quite as dismissive and sullen as before. Perhaps, Jupiter thought, Barbara's neighbour had simply been under some kind of shock. After all, the situation had been anything but normal.

"Was there any other damage from the water spill?" Pete asked as Mr Faring led them to the basement staircase.

"I guess the carpet's ruined."

"And the shelves? The comic book collection? Any damaged issues?"

Mr Faring stopped and turned to Pete. "You noticed my comic books?"

The Second Investigator raised his shoulders. "It's not hard to miss them at all. The shelves are full of them."

"Comic books are my second big hobby after aquatic animals. I have one of the largest collections in California. Fortunately, nothing was damaged, but thanks for asking. Are you interested in comic books as well?"

"I've read a few... as probably everyone does."

"I see." Mr Faring sounded a little disappointed.

He walked down the stairs. There was a closed door at the end, which Mr Faring opened. Behind it, however, they weren't expecting a typical basement but a huge room that probably encompassed the entire footprint of the house... or even more.

However, it was not the size of the basement that amazed the two investigators, rather it was the sight of a gigantic aquarium right in front of them.

"My goodness!" exclaimed Pete. "This is incredible!"

"I am honestly impressed by this construction," Jupiter said as he too, was intrigued. It was a remarkable sight indeed, just like what they would see in any public aquariums in Southern California—only that this setup was beneath a private home!

The aquarium rose higher than a typical man's height, like a giant glass-walled swimming pool that was constructed along the entire wall of the basement except for a short section on both sides of the entrance where the boys were now standing. From here, the boys could not even estimate how big an area the tank occupied. Then, at the centre, was another odd curved-shaped aquarium. From various places on the ceiling, lamps shone down onto the open water surface, bathing the entire area in a slightly bluish light.

In a somewhat close-to-natural environment, aquatic animals were seen crawling and swimming everywhere among submerged water plants. There was a number of silvery, elongated fish, somewhat like pikes with their large mouths and protruding lower jaws. In other places, colourful, longitudinally striped fish gathered.

The entire base was covered with a layer of sand. Reminiscent of a sea bed, there were also algae and rocks alongside many wonderfully colourful corals, some glowing in unreal-looking luminous colours.

It was only when Mr Faring led them to the left side of the basement did the boys see something like a passageway in between the two aquariums. About a metre wide, it seemed to be an entrance to the interior. On closer approach, they realized that the passageway was a

tunnel and that the centre curved aquarium was not a separate tank, but was connected to the entire gigantic setup!

The two boys followed Mr Faring into the tunnel and marvelled at the bizarre underwater world to the right and left behind the glass walls, not to mention the glass ceiling above them.

In the inner area of the aquarium, a huge free sandy area formed the bottom. A dozen large crabs were stalking around on the sand, one scraping with its finger-length claws at porous, reddish-brown stones. Spider-like animals crawled on the inside of the panes while a lobster strutted past.

At the end of the tunnel was a chair. Pete sat down and marvelled at the view of an underwater world, especially above the glass ceiling where he could see fish swimming across.

“Crazy,” he said. “It’s almost like sitting in the middle of the ocean—only without scuba gear.”

“It is gigantic,” said Jupiter, now so impressed that he was almost speechless. “Surely that must be many thousands of litres of water!”

Mr Faring nodded. “Of course! Show me another private household that has an aquarium this big, and I would be really surprised. As far as I know, I hold the record in all of America.”

“Can you even build something like that?” asked Pete.

“It’s custom-made, and don’t ask—it was pretty expensive. As you can see, it’s very possible to build something like that.”

“That’s not what I meant,” explained the Second Investigator. “Isn’t the aquarium so heavy that the bottom—”

“Ah, I see. Indeed, a normal floor wouldn’t hold that load. So I set it up in the basement and also had a thick concrete foundation constructed underneath. That was quite an excavation, I can tell you.”

“Awesome!” Pete watched as suddenly the sandy surface stirred and a pair of eyes appeared. The next moment, a small stingray lazily flopped away.

Mr Faring suddenly seemed much more affable. Apparently he liked the fact that his two visitors were so enthusiastic about the aquarium, having earlier noticed his comic book collection. He didn’t seem like such a bad guy after all, when he wasn’t in shock.

Jupiter walked out of the tunnel and a few steps further to be able to look at the huge tank as a whole. The First Investigator now noticed a small grey plastic box fixed at about eye level next to the door behind which the stairs went up. It was about the size of a hand, and Jupe figured that it probably housed controls for some operation of the aquarium.

“Were you worried,” Jupiter asked Mr Faring, who had been waiting outside the tank, “that not only your smaller aquarium upstairs might have been destroyed, but this beauty here as well?”

“How... how do you figure that? An accident like the one above is very rare.”

“Well, it’s clear that someone deliberately smashed your aquarium. I don’t think there’s any question of an accident. Special glass walls like that don’t just break and—”

Faring’s expression darkened. “That’s none of your business. That’s what I said before, and that’s what I meant.” He glanced at the watch on his wrist as if he was suddenly in an awful hurry. “Besides, time’s up. I’ve shown you what you were interested in. Go now!”

So quickly the mood could change again. Pete also came out of the tunnel of the super aquarium.

Jupiter, however, was not about to give up. “We saw someone in your garden, Mr Faring... A bird-man... In fact, I believe it was a person dressed in a bird costume.”

Barbara's neighbour gasped. "A what? That's ridiculous!" The corners of his mouth twitched. The fact that he closed his eyes so quickly several times in a row that it looked like a wink was just as clear as if he had stamped the words 'I am Nervous' on his forehead.

"You think it's ridiculous?" Jupe asked. "You look pretty scared about it."

"Nonsense! Bird-man? That's ridiculous!" He pointed toward the stairs. "What happens in my house is none of your business. Don't interfere! Is that clear?"

"Just in case, we gave you our card earlier, and in case you need help—"

"I don't need your help. Kids and investigators, that's ridiculous!" Mr Faring snapped.

"What do you know about this bird-man?" asked Jupiter. "Why is he threatening you? And how did he get into the house? Did he break a window? Why didn't you call the police?"

"I don't know anything about it... and stop asking questions! Who do you think you are to interrogate me here? There is no bird-man, and what makes you think someone was here in the house? That's just—"

"I know," Pete interrupted. "That's ridiculous. Even if you say that there is no bird-man, still, we've seen him."

For a moment, the anger disappeared from Mr Faring's face. His new expression, however, could not be interpreted by the two friends. Was it genuine anger?

Mr Faring hastily turned and walked up the stairs. "Come upstairs with me and then leave. Otherwise I'll call the police for trespassing."

"That won't be necessary," Jupiter assured him, "and thank you so much for showing us your aquarium. It's impressive."

"Yeah, yeah..."

A moment later, the front door slammed behind the two boys. They looked at each other, not quite knowing what to make of their visit to Zachariah Faring. At any rate, he had not brought any answers—but new questions.

7. Identity of the Bird-Man

The printer in the headquarters of The Three Investigators was rattling and Bob was busy taking notes.

There was no doubt about it, he had discovered the identity of the bird-man... or rather, he now knew what he was dealing with. However, that brought with it a host of new mysteries. The Three Investigators had been through a lot in the course of their investigation career, and had come across a few horror creatures and hauntings... including going after a person in a raven costume. Is this going to be something like that again?

He gathered up the printouts and his notes, turned off the computer, left Headquarters and swung on his bike outside. By now, it had become completely dark.

Bob made his way to the posh Rocky Beach neighbourhood. He was curious to see what his two friends—and Barbara—would have to say about his discovery. He wondered if they were already lying in wait, watching Mr Faring's property.

When Bob arrived, Barbara intercepted him and led him around the side of her house to a wooden deck. "By the way, I told my father you three were out here on observation duty."

"And what did he think about that?" Bob asked.

"He doesn't mind, because he trusts you and thinks you're good investigators."

"Sounds like you disagree."

"Nonsense!" said Barbara with conviction. "We're the best!"

Bob might have preferred a 'You guys are the best' comment but he said nothing.

A hedge about two metres high surrounded the observation place. It was not as perfectly trimmed as the shrubs in Mr Faring's garden.

Jupiter was sitting on a comfortable deck chair. Pete stood close to the hedge and looked through a gap that gave him a good overview of the neighbouring property. He couldn't see it completely, but at least, he could see most of it. Mr Faring's house itself, of course, obscured a section of the garden. However, the bird-man had appeared on that side of the property at least twice so far.

"We are taking turns watching," Jupiter explained to Bob when he approached.

"You won't believe what I found out," said Bob. "Our bird-man has a name."

"And what would that be?"

"The Feathered Fiend."

"I see," Barbara went on. "Seems like a good fit to me... but what makes you think so? Or rather, how does anyone come to call him that?"

"For the same reason someone named Batman Batman... or Spider-Man Spider-Man. Because it's a pretty cool name."

"And what is that supposed to mean?" asked Pete.

Bob placed the stack of printouts on the garden table next to Jupiter. "It's simple. The Feathered Fiend is a comic book character!"

"A... what?" Pete asked.

"You heard me right. A comic book character that came to life in the middle of Rocky Beach!"

"That's crazy," Barbara said.

“Quite the opposite,” Jupiter countered. “If you ask me, it goes together beautifully. It creates a connection between two things that I haven’t been able to put together at all until now. There’s the smashed aquarium for one thing, and the bird-man for another. Why would such a creature, or a human dressed up like such a creature, break into Mr Faring’s house and destroy something? Now we have a connection, because what does Mr Faring think is awesome besides aquariums and aquatic animals?”

“Certainly not his neighbour’s daughter,” Barbara said pointedly.

Jupiter didn’t even smile. “He loves comic books. Judging by the size of his collection, he is obsessed with them, just like he is with his aquatic animals.”

“So one hobby comes to life and lashes out at the other?” Barbara asked. “Jupiter, as much as I—” She cleared her throat, then mimicked Jupiter’s typical manner of speaking: “Much as I usually appreciate your brilliant thought processes, you seem to be way off the mark on that one.”

“But there must be some connection,” Jupe argued. “Maybe we’ll notice something when Bob tells us more details. You did find out more, didn’t you?”

“Sure!” confirmed Bob. “That comic book character, that is, The Feathered Fiend, was some sort of a masked avenger, but not just a human in disguise, but half a bird himself. It was the result of some bizarre scientific experiment.”

“That sort of thing happens a lot in comics,” Barbara interjected. “Didn’t that happen to Spider-Man?”

“Something like that,” Bob agreed. “Let me go on with the story first! The Feathered Fiend was actually one of the good guys. He tracked down criminals, mostly those who could not be caught by the police in the usual way, but he was very brutal and therefore wanted by the police himself. He was, so to speak, the enemy of all, standing all alone but he fought for justice in his own way.”

Jupiter pinched his lower lip, as he usually did when he was thinking sharply. “Hmm... in other words, he’s a shady hero who takes the law into his own hands. He puts himself above the law and punishes the criminals on his own instead of handing them over to the police.”

“That’s right,” Bob said.

“So he was some kind of criminal himself.” The First Investigator shook his head. “I’ve never heard of this character before.”

“It’s not surprising,” Bob remarked. “The comic book first came out almost seventy years ago. There were not many issues as the series wasn’t particularly successful. Today, they are hard to find, but there are a few die-hard aficionados.”

“And what does The Feathered Fiend in the flesh seek at Mr Faring’s?” asked Barbara.

“That’s just the question!” Pete was still peering through the gap in the hedge, keeping an eye on the neighbouring property. “And now you should relieve me, Jupe. Your comfortable chair is calling me!” He put his hand playfully to his ear. “I hear it quite distinctly.”

“All right.” The First Investigator stood up. “Let’s hope our comic book character who has come to life shows up this very night. I’d like to ask him some questions.”

But the First Investigator’s hopes were not soon fulfilled. Sometime before midnight, Barbara said goodnight and went into her house. She brought The Three Investigators some blankets before she went to sleep.

Thanks to the balmy summer temperatures, they were able to make it outside just fine. It was almost like camping, but only almost. At least one of them had to stay awake. The others didn’t sleep very well either, because they were constantly expecting a danger to suddenly

appear—a danger that could ruffle some feathers for the overly brave—or reckless—investigators.

Time passed agonizingly slowly. All the lights had long since gone out in the neighbour's house. Only rarely did a car pass by on the street.

8. Message in a Bottle

When the sun rose again, Bob was keeping watch. His two friends were asleep on the deck chairs, blankets spread over them. Jupiter even snored a little.

At seven o'clock, something finally happened in the neighbour's house—but nothing exciting. Mr Faring came out, went into the garage and a little later drove off the property in a sleek sports car. The gate opened and closed automatically.

After that, it was back to waiting. Bob was just about to wake Jupiter to take over when a small van stopped in front of the gate. 'Larry's Aquarium Service' was written on the side. Between the words was some silly drawn fish, in particular, a seahorse replaced the letter 'q'.

A man got out of the van. He looked to be in his late twenties and had finger-length, jet-black hair. His jeans were faded. The silly fish also appeared on his T-shirt.

He unlocked the gate to the property, walked through and carefully closed it behind him. Then he walked on calmly and opened the front door. It was clear that he had the keys to Mr Faring's house.

Had this harmless-looking man dressed up as a bird-man the day before and smashed the aquarium? Mr Faring had dodged the question of how the intruder had got into the house. The Three Investigators did not even know if there was a broken window or door anywhere.

Bob looked thoughtfully at the front door for a while longer and then finally wanted to wake his friends... but he did not get the chance.

Suddenly, the front door was ripped open and the man from the aquarium service ran out of the house. He screamed and was pale as a sheet.

Bob heard birds screeching from the open front door!

"Help!" sounded from the neighbouring property.

"Wake up!" shouted Bob to his friends. Then he shook Jupiter awake. "Something's happening!"

Rather than waiting for Jupe to respond, Bob ran off, around the Mathewsons' house, onto the sidewalk, and to the neighbour's property. "I'm coming," he yelled to the man. "I'll help you! Open the gate for me!"

The serviceman had meanwhile staggered up to the gate. The cries of birds still shrilled from the house. Even here, the noise hurt glaringly in the ears. In between, the long and loud clattering of beaks was clearly heard.

The stranger held a key in his hand. There was a bloody scratch on his forearm. His fingers were shaking so much that he could not put the key into the lock of the gate.

Bob put his hand through the bars. "Give me the key, I'll open from the outside."

The man did so without thinking further. He looked back over his shoulder. "This... this isn't happening! A creature... scratched me. With its claw all the way down my arm here." The wound wasn't deep, more like a scratch. There was almost no blood.

"You saw the bird-man in the house, right?" Bob asked while frantically trying to unlock the gate.

"Yes... I—" The man stammered. He was still pale as a sheet.

Finally, Bob opened the gate. In the meantime, Pete and Jupiter had also come up. While Pete still seemed sleepy, the First Investigator was wide awake.

“Come on!” said Jupiter. “We have to get into the house. There are four of us.”

“I... this... this giant bird—” the man stammered.

“It’s a person in disguise. Nothing to worry about. There are four of us,” Jupiter insisted, and was already hurrying towards the house. His two friends followed.

The aquarium serviceman hurried after them. “I can’t just let you guys in the house. I’m not allowed to!”

“There’s someone in there!” shouted Bob back over his shoulder.

“Besides, we’re friends of Mr Faring’s,” Jupiter stretched the truth a little.

“In that case...” the serviceman said a little awkwardly. They could clearly hear that he wasn’t sure of himself.

The bizarre screams still rang out. They echoed in the house and sounded as if they were coming from many places at once.

“I’ve been reading about these sounds,” Bob explained to his friends as they scrambled through the front door. “That screech was the trademark of The Feathered Fiend. When it was heard, his enemies knew they were in for it.”

“Fellas, we should be careful,” said Pete, who suddenly felt queasy. He became afraid of his own courage.

They looked around the hallway as Jupiter closed the front door. Now they could hear it clearly—the screams were coming from the basement—from the giant aquarium! The Three Investigators rushed to the basement stairs.

“Where did you see the bird-man?” Jupe asked the serviceman.

“I was going downstairs and suddenly there he was. He came from the basement, jumped on me and scratched my arm!”

Now even Jupiter’s knees went weak. Someone was waiting downstairs. Disguised or not, he was dangerous! However, down there could have the answers to the many questions and perhaps the solution to this case!

“Is there another exit or opening from the basement?” asked the First Investigator.

The young man shook his head. “Only the vents... but he can’t get out of those, they’re not big enough. In any case, they are barred.”

From below now came eerie cawing and bleating. All at once it fell silent.

Nothing more was heard. Suddenly, there was dead silence.

“He must be down there,” Pete whispered. “He’s hiding.”

“We should call the police,” the serviceman said.

Jupiter raised his hand. “Wait and see. I’m not sure Mr Faring will want to. After all, he didn’t do after the first break-in. It’s one of the many mysteries of this case.”

The man turned even paler, if that was even possible. “The first break-in? What’s... what’s going on here?”

“If we only knew. Come on, fellas, downstairs!” Jupiter led the way, always expecting an attack.

Down in the basement everything was completely quiet, apart from the gurgling of the aquarium. Several pumps were churning up the water so that algae were constantly bending in the slight current.

There was no sign of a bird-man, however. He had to be hiding somewhere... but where? There was hardly any place in the basement where that was possible. Apart from the aquarium and a few small cupboards on the walls, the place offered no secluded corners or niches.

“How can that be?” asked Bob just at the moment when the screech of birds sounded again.

This time, however, it was clearly coming from above.

“He set us up! He’s upstairs!” Pete sprinted up the stairs. His fearfulness of the horrible creature had completely vanished.

The bird cries died away. Pete thought he heard them from the direction of the front door, which he saw was open.

“I’m quite sure I closed the front door!” Jupe confirmed.

“I guess that means the bird-man got away from us,” Pete said bitterly. “He tricked us by every trick in the book.”

“But how?” asked Bob. “We heard his screams from the basement.”

“Maybe he hid a speaker there. We’ve got to check!” The First Investigator ran back downstairs.

While it had been clear that the bird-man could not have been hiding down there, it was quite a different story in the case of what might have been a tiny technical device. That could have been attached in a thousand places.

“Guys, I’m really not sure I should have let you in,” the aquarium serviceman said.

“Even if you are friends of Mr Faring, but now that this... this intruder is no longer here, you should leave.”

“We’re investigators,” Bob explained, “and we’re investigating the case of The Feathered Fiend.” He handed the young man their business card.

He looked at them in amazement, reading out the names of the three friends. “I’m Thomas Malone,” he then introduced himself. “I’ve been taking care of this special aquarium since the beginning.”

Jupiter was glad for the distraction Bob had created with the card. It gave him some time to look around the basement. He wondered if The Feathered Fiend had possibly placed speakers and other gadgets throughout the house and using them to terrify Mr Faring? Perhaps that was why Barbara’s neighbour had reacted so brusquely when they had asked him about the bird-man because he had been terrorized.

Questions upon questions, but no answers... and that annoyed the First Investigator.

Suddenly he discovered something—something was floating on the surface of the water that certainly hadn’t been there before.

“I don’t believe it,” he said, pointing upwards. “The Feathered Fiend has left a message in a bottle!”

There was a bottle was floating on the water. It was made of green glass and closed with a screw cap. A few of the shiny silver fish, which looked like pikes, circled around it and poked it again and again.

Fortunately, the bottle floated far enough to the edge that Jupiter might be able to reach it if he stood right up against the side wall and reached over his head.

Already his hand was approaching the bottle when Thomas Malone suddenly cried out: “Wait! Get back!” He ran up to Jupiter, grabbed his arm, and yanked him aside. “I’ll get it!”

“What’s the matter?” asked the First Investigator, puzzled.

Thomas pointed into the aquarium. “Don’t you know what kind of fish those are? They’re darned fast, and if your hand reaches for that bottle, they might strike at you.”

Jupiter looked at him, perplexed.

“They’re barracudas!” the serviceman said.

“Yeah, but I as I know, it is rare for humans to be bitten by barracudas,” Jupe said.

“Yes, but barracudas may also mistake things that glint and shine for prey,” Malone explained, “and that bottle is shiny. They can snap quickly and effectively. Believe it or not, they can bite your finger right off! So it is best to take precautions.”

All at once, Jupiter had a sinking feeling in his stomach. He still felt sick afterwards. "Thank you. Barracudas, of course. How could I have made such a mistake?"

"This seems to me like something out of one of those bad stories Mr Malone was talking about," Pete commented. "Who keeps barracudas at home, except villains from James Bond movies?"

"You'd laugh," Thomas Malone agreed. "A lot of people do."

"But I don't think it's a laughing matter," assured the Second Investigator. "So how do we get the bottle out of there?"

"Oh, no problem." Mr Malone slapped the glass with the flat of his hand. The barracudas were startled and swam away. "One thing is that they are easily driven off. Now a quick grab and—" He snatched up the bottle.

Spellbound, The Three Investigators looked at the green bottle. Indeed, there was something in it.

"May I?" asked Bob. He took the bottle and unscrewed it. A little water dripped out. "It obviously wasn't sealed properly," he commented and lifted the bottle to look inside.

"There's something there. A rolled-up piece of paper!" He held the bottle at an angle, shook it, and was able to grasp the front edge with his fingertips.

Bob carefully took the paper out and unrolled it.

"Are you kidding?" asked Pete.

They look at a page torn out of a comic book—not just any comic book but that of *The Feathered Fiend*. Bob handed the page to Pete and asked him to hold it. He pulled his mobile phone out of his pocket and photographed the page several times from both sides.

"Hand this page over to Mr Faring," Jupiter asked the aquarium serviceman. "You're welcome to tell him that we helped you chase off the intruder. After all, we have nothing to hide, but we really should be going now."

"That's a good idea, boys," said Mr Malone, relieved. He eyed the injury on his forearm and probably concluded that it wasn't that bad. "I'll call Mr Faring and tell him that a madman in a costume has broken into his house. And you really think he won't inform the police?"

"You should ask him that yourself," the First Investigator said.

9. ‘A Downright Blackmail’

The Three Investigators left the house. On the street they conferred.

“The Feathered Fiend got into the house without us noticing,” Bob said, “and without setting off any alarms. I wonder how he managed that.”

“Besides, what he was doing in the house is completely unclear to me,” Pete said. “Don’t you think it’s strange? He broke in, screamed around, left a strange message... but he didn’t seem to have stolen anything... although I’m sure there are very valuable things in the house.”

Bob grinned. “Fish and comic books aren’t what usually appeal to burglars.”

Jupiter pinched his lower lip. “While I’m sure there would be other perfectly worthwhile items in the house, it could still be about something else entirely.”

“And what would that be?” asked the Second Investigator.

“That’s just what I don’t know!” Jupe replied annoyingly. “That’s the problem... but we have a lead to think about.”

Bob nodded. “The message.”

“A double-sided page from a comic book,” Pete said doubtfully. “That seems to me a very strange message.”

“Strange, yes—but it fits like a glove. I think we should take a closer look. I don’t think it will do much good to keep watching the house for the next few hours. The Feathered Fiend has achieved what it wanted at the moment. However, we will definitely be on the lookout again during the night... and this time, we’ll do it in a way that gives us a complete view of the property. Maybe we can use several of Barbara’s security cameras pointing at different locations.”

Pete rubbed his eyes. “And when do we sleep?”

Jupiter looked at his friend and seemed honestly surprised. “When the case is solved.”

The Three Investigators returned to Barbara’s house to retrieve their things. They explained the situation to her.

“You photographed the page?” she asked with old-fashioned fieriness. “I’ll get a copy on my computer real quick.”

“We will investigate the page ourselves,” Jupiter said. “There is no need for—”

“Hey,” the girl interrupted. “I’m just taking a copy! It won’t destroy anything for you, okay? Maybe I’ll notice something you might miss.”

The friends didn’t believe that, but since they didn’t feel like arguing with Barbara, they granted her wish. Afterwards they said goodbye and went on their way to their headquarters.

At last they got around to looking more closely at the strange bottle message from The Feathered Fiend. Bob printed out the photos several times so that everyone had a set.

It was pages seven and eight of a particular issue of the comic book, and they could tell that it was the last two pages of the first story in that issue. Despite not having all the pages, The Three Investigators immediately understood what it was all about as the storyline wasn’t too complicated. Most importantly, the story fit the current situation perfectly. The resemblance to the events surrounding Mr Faring was unmistakable.

On page seven, a man came back home to his luxury apartment and found everything completely trashed. Drawers had been ripped open, cupboards ransacked, crockery smashed. All the taps had been turned on, the bathtub and the sinks in the bathroom were overflowing, as was the kitchen sink.

“Leaving aside the fact that this was pretty badly drawn,” Bob said, “it’s really amazing. Did you see that in the middle of page seven? The man finds a message in a bottle from The Feathered Fiend in his fish tank! Just like Mr Faring. That’s crazy.”

“It was not only badly drawn,” Jupiter commented, “but badly written as well. When the man shouts ‘My Aqarium!!!’, there is no ‘u’ after the ‘q’. Ouch! And what’s with the three exclamation marks? That hurts to look at.”

“Never mind that,” Pete interjected. “I think the message he finds in the bottle is much more interesting!”

The Second Investigator read aloud:

“Hank Templeton, you have disobeyed my orders and continued to pursue your criminal activities! This is my final warning. If you sell drugs again, I will punish you!”

“Sounds pretty trashy,” Bob said, “but kind of exciting. Read on!”

Pete continued: “This Mr Templeton says to himself, I suppose, because there is no one else in the room:”

“What do you call orders, you feathered freak! I call it a downright BLACKMAIL!!”

“The last word is in capital letters,” Pete added. “followed by two exclamation marks—just for you to note, Jupe.”

The Three Investigators read on. The first page ended with Templeton angrily throwing the message into the rubbish bin, and then going on about his criminal business and making a lot of money from it.

On the next page, almost every frame showed The Feathered Fiend—a strange sight, because the friends had yet to see this creature face-to-face. Barbara had seen the bird-man, though, and there was that video recording. No doubt it was the very Feathered Fiend that had been drawn in the comic story with broad strokes and garish colours.

The story continued showing how the bird-man watched the drug dealer for a while longer and then set a trap for him. The dealer tried to escape and sped away in his car, but The Feathered Fiend had manipulated the brakes of the car and the criminal slammed into a tree.

The story ended with The Feathered Fiend standing in front of the burning and completely dented car. A box in the bottom corner of the last frame announced:

“Is this the end? Not yet!!! Because now... The Feathered Fiend poses a treacherous riddle, and the police are baffled. ‘From one makes two’—what does it mean...???

“Makes you wonder,” Jupiter said pointedly, “why there are so incredibly many punctuation marks in those few words.”

Everyone laughed until Pete said: “On a more serious note, I wonder why our special friend left this comic page with Mr Faring of all people.”

“Because there’s a message in a bottle in the aquarium in this story as well,” suggested Bob.

“A similarity, but that can’t be the real reason,” the First Investigator surmised. “The Feathered Fiend is not only trying to create a prank, but to tell Mr Faring something... only what?”

“It’s obvious,” Bob said, scribbling something on his printout of the comic pages with a pen in his hand.

“What is obvious?” asked the First Investigator.

“Well... at least I have a guess. What’s the moral of this story, as far as we see it on these two pages?”

Jupiter put his hands together and propped his chin on his outstretched thumbs. “That drug trafficking is bad and will be punished in the end?”

Bob nodded. “Sure, but that’s not what I meant. At least if you think like The Feathered Fiend, it’s really about something else. The message is clear, isn’t it? When a criminal is warned by the bird-man, he had better give in or it won’t end well. Hank Templeton feels blackmailed by The Feathered Fiend, but he didn’t give in... and for that he had to pay a price.”

“Are you saying—” Pete began.

“Quite so!” Bob interrupted. “I believe that our Feathered Fiend has blackmailed Mr Faring, and sent him a warning with this message in a bottle—specifically ‘give in, or you’ll pay the price!’ Mr Faring will undoubtedly understand this message immediately, and it should be more meaningful to him than a lot of blackmailing words.”

Jupiter nodded appreciatively. “A good thought, Bob. If Mr Faring has indeed been blackmailed for some time, that would at least explain why he reacted so dismissively and brusquely when we mentioned the bird-man. He’s scared about something and doesn’t want anyone to know about it.”

Bob retreated to the computer and did some search on the Internet. “I’ve been looking for this story,” he informed his friends a little later. “Hold on to your hats—it’s from the first issue of the series and it was published in 1946. There are a total of two stories in that issue.”

“Well?” asked Pete.

“And this issue is extremely rare... no wonder, given its age.”

Jupiter looked closely at the printout of the photograph. “We should have taken a closer look at the paper from the bottle. Do you think that could have been a page from a comic book that old?”

“Surely not,” Pete agreed. “If it’s that old and that rare, it’s bound to be valuable. Why would someone just tear it up like that? Maybe it was a copy or something.”

“You’ve got a point there. After all, comic books can be very expensive,” Bob agreed.

“You bet!” recalled Pete. “I also know about the first *Batman* comic book. It predates the first issue of *The Feathered Fiend* by a few years. An original copy of it was sold for a lot of money the other day. I saw a report about it on TV.”

Bob’s fingers flew across the keyboard. Quickly he found what he was looking for. “You’re right. Listen to this. There are still some original copies of the first *Batman* comic book, mostly in poor condition. Most copies, of course, have been thrown away at some point. The other day, an unusually well-preserved copy was sold, just like Pete said... for more than a million dollars!”

“A million dollars?” Jupiter exclaimed. “I must admit, friends, that surprises me. But what about our Feathered Fiend? After all, hardly anyone knows about this character these days.”

“I’ll find out,” Bob said. “I think the more we know about this forgotten comic book series, the better. That can certainly help us. I’ll get going now.”

“Where are you going?” asked Pete. “To the library?”

“To Los Angeles,” Bob replied. “There is one of the biggest comic book stores in all of Southern California there. It’s called...” Bob looked up the screen, “‘Comics Number 1’ and it’s owned by a guy named Timothy Jackson. From the looks of it, they have a huge warehouse full of old comic books and magazines from all sorts of series. I hope I can find someone there who knows their stuff.” Bob said goodbye and left Headquarters.

Jupiter and Pete were still thinking about how best to proceed when the phone rang. The First Investigator picked it up. “The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking.”

“Jupiter!” It was Barbara. “Mr Faring rang here. He wants to talk to you. I told him you’d come by his house as soon as you could. I hope that was to your liking.”

“Now that’s what I call pleasant news!” said the First Investigator, beaming.

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Barbara agreed. “To be honest, Mr Faring sounded really annoyed.”

10. A Sensational Auction

“How dare you sneak into my house while I’m away?” Mr Faring harangued Jupiter and Pete.

They were standing outside the locked gate to the garden. When the two investigators had rung the bell, Barbara’s neighbour had run through the garden towards them and only stopped just beyond the gate.

“Your serviceman had called for help,” Jupiter replied. “We were merely doing our duty by helping him with—”

“You mean Thomas Malone of the aquarium service?” interrupted Zachariah Faring.

“That’s him, and I guess he told you about it.”

“Of course he did!”

“Anyway, he rushed out of the house, white as a sheet, because a bird-man attacked him.” The First Investigator cleared his throat. “The same bird-man, by the way, that you say doesn’t exist. Mr Malone probably disagrees.”

“And you know as well as we do,” added Pete, “that we are speaking of The Feathered Fiend.”

When Pete mentioned the name, Mr Faring was momentarily speechless. He gasped for breath. “Nonsense!” he said at last, probably with less than half the conviction he had wanted. “And now you will accompany me to Mr Mathewson!”

“W-why should we?” asked Pete, dumbfounded.

“Because your fine friend is in cahoots with you, and once and for all, I’m going to get all of you out of my affairs! Her father will see to it that she minds her own business in the future!” He opened the gate and came out. “I don’t know your families, but believe me, if you show up here again, I’ll barge in on them and make sure you get the grounding of a lifetime!” He slammed the gate behind him. It clanged shut. “On now, come along!” With brisk steps, he marched off.

The two friends exchanged a glance. They didn’t have to speak their minds to know what the other was thinking. They both wondered if Mr Faring wasn’t overdoing by giving them a lecture in the presence of Barbara’s father.

Jupiter tried his luck again. “I can understand you being upset, but we were really just trying to apprehend the intruder when Mr Malone called for help—much like yourself yesterday when you found your aquarium destroyed. We rushed to your aid then, and we—”

“Hush now!” Zachariah Faring hissed at them. “I don’t want to hear another word! Instead, you will listen to me, and you’re going to listen very carefully. Where’s your other friend anyway?”

“Bob? … He’s got something to do,” Pete stammered.

“Then you’ll tell him what I have to say!”

“Sure we will,” Jupiter tried to calm the situation down a bit.

By now, they were walking along the driveway towards the Mathewsons’ house.

“You’ll be surprised at what I’m about to say,” Mr Faring announced, now considerably quieter and with no anger at all in his voice. He seemed a changed man. “I need your help…”

Bob Andrews parked his old Beetle in an amazingly large car park in the industrial estate on the southern outskirts of Los Angeles. About two dozen cars were also parked there, but not a person was to be seen. A steady roar drifted over from the busy street beyond.

The building that housed the comic book store was to his right. Bob spotted the entrance, with a small canopy arching over it. A sign proclaimed the name of the store, stylized as: 'Comics #1'.

Bob opened the door and went inside. He found himself in a large hall lined all around with shelves crammed with—what else but—comic books. A larger-than-life cardboard figure of Spider-Man hung upside down from the ceiling. On one side of the hall was a rummage table that read 'Defective Copies'. Another sign announced that these comic books could be purchased by weight. The price seemed very low to Bob.

He walked down a narrow aisle to a store employee sitting bored behind a computer at the checkout counter. Dreadlocks hung down to his shoulders and he looked to be about forty years old. He wore a bright red shirt with the name printed on it—'Timothy Jackson'.

According to the information Bob found on the Internet, he was the store owner.

"Can I help you?" asked Timothy Jackson, not looking up from the comic book that lay on the counter in front of him.

"I was just looking around," Bob said, not wanting to barge in. There would surely be another opportunity to ask about *The Feathered Fiend* comic books.

"All right," he got a reply from Mr Dreadlocks. "New stuff is in this section. It's all in alphabetical order, but only the stuff up to a unit price of ten dollars is here. Anything more valuable you'll find at the back of the store in the antiquarian section. If you are interested in collectibles, the fellow stationed there will explain everything to you. If he's not in his seat, he's rummaging through some shelves. You'll recognize him by his bald head. He's got a sunburn on it." Now Mr Jackson did look up, for the first time. "By the looks of it, I don't suppose you're looking for expensive collectibles, are you?"

"I might take a look," replied Bob, who felt as if he had entered a strange world.

"Then the—"

"I know. The fellow with the bald head will explain it all to me."

"That's right," Timothy Jackson mumbled. "I see you know your way around."

"Well, that was what you told me a minute ago..." Bob thought to himself, but he stifled any comment though. Instead, he said: "Actually, no. One question—do you have anything like a directory or catalogue to help me find my way around?"

"Sure." Mr Jackson reached under the counter and pulled out a surprisingly thick but cheaply bound catalogue. "Just hand it back later, okay? It's my personal copy. Don't bother with all the stuff I've marked in it."

With the catalogue in hand, Bob marched off. He could hardly believe how far the hall stretched—and with it, the seemingly endless shelves full of comic books. He flipped through the catalogue and could even less grasp how many different comic book series there were. After a dozen pages, he was still at the letter 'A'. By then, he was no longer surprised that there was a series about a bird-man who administered vigilante justice to criminals who slipped through the police's fingers.

"Have you found what you are looking for?" a voice suddenly sounded, snapping him out of his thoughts.

Bob looked up from the catalogue. A young man with thick brown curls—stood before him, and he didn't look like what Bob had imagined a typical comic book geek to be. His wore a shirt with a loosely tied tie and looked as if he had just given a lecture at a university.

“Yes,” Bob replied, taking another quick look at the comic book on the shelf in front of him. “Number 5 of *Skeleton House Mysteries*.”

“Ha! I didn’t realize this is considered rare,” the man commented. “Somehow, not too many people are interested in this series. Well, that can change... I’m Reggie, by the way.”

“Bob,” replied Bob. “I suppose you know your way around comic books.”

“I’ve only been collecting for fifteen years,” Reggie said modestly.

“So do you work here?” Bob asked.

“Part-time,” Reggie replied.

“Do you have any issues of *The Feathered Fiend*?”

Reggie whistled softly and fiddled with his tie. “Oooh...” he went on. “A connoisseur! Most of the customers we have here just buy some junk and have no idea about the really interesting collectibles.”

Bob thought he was on extremely thin ice with this conversation. Why had he mentioned the *Skeleton House Mysteries* thing? Now it looked like he was actually an expert.

“So do you have any from *The Feathered Fiend* series?” Bob asked again.

“A couple of the middle issues but they are not in really good condition. I recall we have Number 12 with a torn cover and two or three others issues with creased pages. Hang on, I’ll check my collection list. I always have this with me.”

Reggie pulled a small pad from his back pocket and turned quite a few pages. “Here —*The Feathered Fiend*. I’ve also got Number 21 in duplicate, but in a pretty nasty condition though. You can have it for eight bucks... or we can trade, which I’d prefer, of course.”

“I’ll think about it,” Bob said.

“Are you interest specifically in this series?” Reggie asked.

“Yes, actually,” Bob replied. “I was reading a little from the first issue just today.”

“You don’t have the first issue, do you?” Reggie was suddenly excited. “There’s no such thing! You’re not... oh, of course you’re talking about the reprint they made a few years ago, are you?”

“Sure, the reprint,” Bob said, as if this wasn’t the first time he’d heard of it. “Who would have an original Number 1 at home?”

Reggie laughed and slapped Bob on the shoulder. “Ha! At least, not me! For a moment, I thought you were the great stranger who bought it here two—or was it three—years ago... but you’re a bit too young for that, aren’t you?”

“Bought it here?” asked Bob.

“Didn’t you know about the auction back then?”

“Uh, no, that must have totally passed me by somehow.”

“That was a sensation, wasn’t it? \$350,000 went over the counter for that issue. That’s so amazing!”

11. Bloody Feathers

For a moment, Jupiter and Pete thought they had misheard Mr Faring.

The First Investigator was the first to pull himself together. He understood why Barbara's neighbour had suddenly changed and asked for the support of The Three Investigators.

"I assure you, Mr Faring, that we are happy to help," Jupiter said, "and I also understand why you have been playing us up to this moment."

"What do you mean?"

"The events clearly fit together and make a wonderful overall picture. We've already theorized that The Feathered Fiend, or whoever is hiding behind the costume, is blackmailing you. Now you think you're not safe in your home and on your property because he may be eavesdropping on you. Therefore, you've given the eavesdropper a reason why you're leaving with us... so now you can talk to us openly."

Mr Faring lifted the right corner of his mouth into a wry grin. "You're good, boy. Apparently you're quite capable to be investigators."

Jupiter looked pleased. "I can't disagree with that view."

They reached the front door and rang the bell.

"I'm willing to trust you." Mr Faring sighed. "I don't have much choice, do I? This is getting to be way over my head... or no... frankly, it's already over my head."

Barbara opened after only a few seconds. She nodded to her neighbour. "Mr Faring..." She turned to the two boys and looked contrite. By now she was no longer wearing her floral dress, but a T-shirt with confusing patterns of blue and brown.

Barbara turned to Pete and said: "I hope you're not mad at me for contacting you and asking you here. Mr Faring told me he wanted to see you right away or he'd call the police and—"

"It's all right, Barbara," Pete assured her.

They went into the house. Barbara led them into the living room, the walls of which were covered with bookshelves. They sat down at the round living-room table, with Mr Faring pushing the chair very far back and taking a seat only on the front edge. Sitting up perfectly straight, he reached into his trouser pocket and took out a piece of paper. Mr Faring put it down in front of him without giving any explanation.

"My father is not in the house," said Barbara meekly. "He's at the university until late this evening. Would you like something to drink? I can get a soda... or water. Mr Faring, what—"

"Never mind," Pete interrupted the torrent of talk that could go out of hand. Barbara seemed to be getting more into the swing of things with each word. "It's all a little different from what we thought. Mr Faring is asking us for help."

"But we were really only trying to help you, Mr Faring, and besides—" Barbara faltered. "You're asking—what? Us for help?"

"More specifically, he's asking The Three Investigators for help," Jupe pointed out.

From one second to the next, Barbara regained her old self-assurance. "Hey! You already have a client—me!"

“—Which we certainly won’t forget,” the First Investigator assured her. “Since this is about the same issue, we can also handle the case for him. What is important now is to get back to the subject at hand. Mr Faring, how exactly can we help you?”

Barbara’s neighbour moved back in his chair a tiny bit. “As you quite correctly guessed, The Feathered Fiend has been blackmailing me for some time.”

“Oh yeah, since when did we guessed that?” asked Barbara. “Did I miss something there?”

“Indeed you did,” Pete whispered to her, “but now just let Mr Faring continue.”

Mr Faring continued speaking: “However, it’s not about me stopping any crimes, as in the comic story. You’ve read the message in a bottle, after all—not that you’ll get the wrong impression of me.”

“Then why did the bird-man send you this page of all things?” asked Barbara.

“To emphasize that I can’t defend myself against The Feathered Fiend.”

Barbara snapped her fingers. “Resistance is futile.”

Her neighbour looked at her in confusion. “I suppose that’s the message, yes... though I can’t be as excited about it as you are.”

“Oh?” Barbara went on. “Excuse me?”

“We figured as much, Mr Faring,” Jupiter said.

“Nothing surprises me so easily now,” Mr Faring continued. “I’m sorry I was so dismissive of you at first. Regarding the blackmail, I just don’t know what to do anymore. Oh, you understand...”

“Indeed we do,” Pete assured him. “We’re more than willing to help you. However, we need more information, most importantly—why is The Feathered Fiend blackmailing you? Do you have any idea who might be hiding behind the mask?”

Mr Faring held out his hands defensively. “I’ll tell you all about it—which I’m afraid I don’t know as much as you’d probably expect.”

“Let’s start with the basic question,” Jupiter asked. “Pete has already stated it. Why is The Feathered Fiend blackmailing you? Or, more to the point—what does he want from you? Probably not simply a certain sum of money. That would be illogical.”

“What makes you think of that?” asked Mr Faring.

“Several pieces of evidence point to this—most notably the fact that he appears to have entered your home several times without stealing anything, right? Which, by the way, also interests me—how was he able to get into your house?”

“That’s what I’d like to know. He certainly didn’t have to use force... but yes, he hasn’t stolen anything. It’s also not about money. It’s about ‘Bloody Feathers’!”

Bob was still engrossed in conversation with the comic book collector Reggie. By now, he knew almost everything about the historical series of *The Feathered Fiend*.

Together they stood in front of the locked glass cabinet in which all the copies available there were placed. To do this, they had gone to the back area where the more valuable copies were kept. However, there was no sign of the bald-headed employee.

There were exactly ten comic books displayed there for sale. “—And none of them in perfect condition,” as Reggie let Bob know. “All the copies have creases, and some even have rust stains at the staples!” said Reggie in a tone as if he had to eat a whole bowl of mouldy strawberries. He then took one of the comic books out of the glass cabinet.

The cover of the comic book featured The Feathered Fiend climbing up the side of a house. The words ‘Bloody Feathers’ was emblazoned in bright red letters on the cover.

Underneath, in noticeably smaller letters, it read:

Witness the origin of the SCARY!! No one knows who he is... not even us. A... hero? It doesn't look like it...!

The series title was written at the top—*The Feathered Fiend*. Feathers sprouted from the individual letters.

“This is Number 1,” Reggie said. “Of course, this is only the reprint... but you already know that.”

“Sure!” Bob took the comic book. “I’ve got a torn out page at home. I think I’ll buy this copy.” He checked the price tag on the clear protective cover—it was fifteen dollars. Bob had just about that much on him.

Reggie looked at his watch. “Oh, I have to go.” He pulled a pristine white business card from the pocket of his shirt. “Drop me an e-mail. Maybe we can trade some time.”

“Sure,” Bob agreed. He considered giving him his card too, but that would be their investigation agency’s. At the spur of the moment, he decided against it as that would only provoke questions. In any case, it was good to be able to contact Reggie in case there were any questions about the history of the series.

Bob went back to the checkout counter and handed the comic book and the thick catalogue to Timothy Jackson. When the store owner saw the comic book, he whistled softly through his teeth. “Cool. Did you know we sold an original Number 1 here three years ago?”

“Sure,” Bob said, as if he hadn’t just heard it from Reggie a few minutes ago. “To whom, actually?”

“Ha, nice try, boy!” A broad grin appeared on Mr Jackson’s face, and he shook his head such that his dreadlocks flew around. “Unfortunately, I can’t tell you. The buyer wanted to remain anonymous back then and that hasn’t changed in the meantime. It was a cool auction, and something that massive will probably never happen here again.”

“But surely you can tell me one thing—where did you get the comic book in the first place?”

“It was a lucky find. We’re always buying up random boxes of comic books that someone finds in the attic or basement of houses they’ve inherited or bought... or in the bulky waste. You wouldn’t believe where collections like that turn up. Mostly worthless stuff, of course, but that one time, we were really lucky. There was great stuff in the middle of the box amongst all the junk. The best, of course, was the original ‘Bloody Feathers’.”

“So you started an auction?”

“Right. There must have been fifty people here in the store. They could also bid by phone and people did that from all over the country—even from Europe, by the way. We could have sold *The Feathered Fiend* Number 1 live here in the store for a whopping \$340,000.”

Timothy Jackson laughed. “However, the bid of \$350,000 came over the phone. The bidder had contacted us days before. We knew he had the funds to do it.”

Bob wanted to ask a few more questions, but other customers came to pay so the owner’s chatty mood vanished into thin air. So he decided to leave the store.

While Bob was driving back to Rocky Beach in his Beetle, a lot of thoughts were going through his head. What was most intriguing was the amount of \$350,000 paid for a single copy of a comic book. There had to be something more to this. Such an expensive comic book had been sold in Los Angeles some three years ago, and now this strange bird-man character showed up in Rocky Beach? There had to be a connection! What that connection

might be, Bob didn't know yet... or was he just telling himself that? Could it really be a coincidence? And where did Mr Faring come in?

Of course! Bob was annoyed that it hadn't occurred to him right away. The anonymous bidder at the auction, who had offered an enormous amount of money in advance had to be Mr Faring! So if he were the mysterious buyer, then—

Suddenly, horns honked, brakes squealed, and Bob gripped tightly to his steering wheel, wondering what was that all about. The Beetle skidded slightly. A concert of horns went off all around him. Bob's heart raced. He had been so lost in thought that he had run a red light!

Bob picked up speed gradually. He vowed to pay better attention to the traffic now. In any case, he was dying to finally tell his colleagues about Mr Faring and the insanely expensive first issue of *The Feathered Fiend*.

12. Mr Faring is Abducted

Pete turned a little pale. "He's after blood? That sounds pretty bad!"

For the first time since they knew him, Mr Faring laughed out loud. "Sure, how should you know what's meant by that? That's the number one issue of *The Feathered Fiend*—a very old, very valuable comic book, and it is subtitled 'Bloody Feathers'."

"We actually didn't know that," Jupiter admitted, "but we do know that the two pages that were in the message in the bottle were from this particular issue."

"More precisely, from a reprint that is only a few years old," Mr Faring clarified. "It's a so-called 'facsimile edition' or 'replica', which at first glance looks exactly like the original—but, of course, it is not so valuable. There were a thousand of such replicas produced for the collector's market. I, however, have one of the very rare originals." At these last words, he lowered his voice and looked around, as if expecting The Feathered Fiend itself to leap in from some corner of the room.

"So is that what this is all about?" asked Barbara, stunned. "Why is that bird-man character going through all this trouble? How valuable can a thing like that be?"

Mr Faring was now drumming his fingers on the tabletop. "Well, I bought it a few years ago for \$350,000."

"Three hun—" Barbara obviously couldn't get the word out fully. "—And where do you keep it? In a high-security vault somewhere?"

"I hid the comic book in my house—so well that no burglar could find it."

"Where?" asked Pete.

Zachariah Faring hesitated. "Even though I trust you, I'm not sure I should tell you. I want you to help me take out that bird-man freak, turn him over to the police or whatever."

"Was The Feathered Fiend character ever caught in the comic story?" asked the Second Investigator.

"Why does that matter?" Mr Faring wondered.

"Perhaps there is a connection..." Pete replied.

"The series was suddenly discontinued after forty-nine issues. The writers could no longer plan a reasonable ending. Therefore, the fate of our special friend remained unknown."

"Forty-nine issues?" asked Barbara. "Couldn't they have at least celebrated the anniversary with Number 50?"

Jupiter cleared his throat. "The strangest things happen in publishing... but it really doesn't matter to our case now! We should—"

That was as far as he got.

A high-pitched yowling sound rang out, piercing and shrill. It came from outside, and although all the windows were closed, it was deafeningly loud in the living room.

Mr Faring jumped up so impulsively that his chair skidded backwards, tipped over and fell. "That's my alarm system. Someone's breaking into my house! Barbara, call the police!" With that, Mr Faring ran out the door of the living room.

"That has to be the bird-man!" Pete exclaimed. "We've got to get him—" The next moment, he was rushing after Mr Faring, who was tearing open the Mathewsons' front door.

By the time Jupiter got out of Barbara's house, Pete had sprinted past Mr Faring. The alarm continued to wail. Across the street, a window opened.

A car roared up and braked with screeching tyres right next to Jupiter. It was a white Chevrolet SUV. Then the car stopped next to Mr Faring. Then, the door flew open and a figure jumped out. He wore a Mickey Mouse mask on his face. Jupiter was totally perplexed as the stranger grabbed Mr Faring and dragged him into the car.

"Stop!" cried Jupiter.

By that time, Pete, who was ahead of all of them, had already turned around and saw what had happened. He ran back towards the car, trying to grab the door, but it was slammed shut right under his nose.

Through the tinted windows of the back seat, the two saw Mr Faring struggling. He raised his arms and tried to free himself from the grip of his captor.

However, the car was already rolling away. On the driver's seat sat a second figure, and he was also wearing a mask. Pete only noticed that the man was very slim.

It didn't look like Jupiter and Pete could prevent the abduction.

Nevertheless, the Second Investigator went after the Chevrolet. Running at full speed, he managed to grab the handle and yank the door open. He saw the abductor was holding Mr Faring back. The victim was kicking his legs, and Pete wanted to interfere. Only for a split-second, did he still have direct visual contact with Mr Faring, who was staring at him with eyes widened in panic.

"From one makes two!" Mr Faring shouted to the Second Investigator. "Take it to safety!"

The car drove on, and although Pete ran with it, he could not keep up the speed and had to let go of the door handle. He had to watch unconsciously as the door then slammed shut and Mr Faring's abductors sped off with their victim.

Pete stopped, breathing heavily. Jupiter was suddenly beside him. "The licence number," Pete groaned. "Did you see it?"

"Not a chance," Jupiter said in frustration. "It was completely smeared with dirt and unrecognizable."

A hundred metres ahead of them, the car turned.

"Did you see anything in the car?" asked Jupiter.

"It all happened so fast. There were two abductors—men, I guess. The masks completely covered their faces. One was tall and broad-shouldered. I can't say anything about the driver, except that he was skinny as a rail."

"There's nothing more we can do here," Jupe decided. "We need to get to Mr Faring's house, which I doubt has actually been broken into. Come on, let's go!"

Pete looked at his friend in wonder as the alarm continued to wail. "Oh yeah?"

"Think about it, Pete—" Jupe pulled him along. "The Feathered Fiend has already entered the house twice without setting off the alarm. He could have done it a third time if he wanted to... right?"

"Probably so."

"In addition, our opponent may be listening in on Mr Faring's house and grounds," Jupe continued. "Mr Faring himself suspected as much. I think it's also very likely that the bird-man has hidden small speakers in the house, from which his blood-curdling screeches can be heard... so why not bugs as well? That's how he found out Mr Faring had gone with us to Barbara's house. It was the perfect time to use the alarm system to lure him out into the street and abduct him. Mr Faring walked right into the trap and we couldn't stop it."

"How could we have known?" asked Pete, who had no doubt of his friend's conclusions.

“We probably couldn’t have known,” Jupiter admitted, “but it still annoys me that our opponent is always one step ahead of us. We know far too little about him.”

It was only at this moment that Pete remembered the extremely strange words that the abducted man had shouted to him from the car. In all the excitement he had forgotten that curious detail. “Mr Faring said something to me, Jupe.”

“Now don’t make it so exciting!”

“It was totally weird.”

“Out with it!”

“I would have thought he was calling for help or something—instead, what he yelled at me was: ‘From one makes two! Take it to safety!’ Don’t ask me what that means.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. ‘From one makes two’... I find it strange that—”

“On the contrary! It is most interesting, for this is not the first time we have heard these words!”

13. 'From One Makes Two'

"Really?" asked Pete. "I'm sorry, but I seem to be at a loss there. Where did you hear those words?"

Jupiter grinned. "Because I read the message left by The Feathered Fiend carefully."

"Me too, actually, but—" The Second Investigator broke off in mid-word. "You're right," he continued. "The preview of The Feathered Fiend's next adventure. That's where that very peculiar phrase came from, and that was also the first part of Mr Faring's message."

They racked their brains, trying to figure out what the phrase meant. The howling of the alarm system did not help them to concentrate.

More and more windows opened in the surrounding area. Some people also came out of their houses and looked around curiously, but no one ran directly to Mr Faring's property. Probably the phones had already rung a dozen times at the police station.

While the two friends were still wondering if they should check on the house, a dark blue Buick roared to a screeching halt. One front wheel bumped onto the sidewalk.

The driver jumped out of the car. He was a muscular man in his mid-forties with shoulders like a wardrobe. He wore dark trousers and a blue shirt with a grey jacket over it. He didn't look around for long, but hurried to the gate of Mr Faring's property with a tense look on his face.

"Jupe, look at that," Pete murmured to his friend. "That guy's got a gun holster under his jacket!"

"—And another gun in his waistband," added the First Investigator.

The boys discreetly stood back and watched what was happening. The stranger opened the gate to the property. Evidently he had the key. He hurried to the house, paused briefly, listened, unlocked the door and went inside. A few seconds later, the alarm system fell silent. The sudden silence literally buzzed in the ears of the two investigators.

"He could be the employee of a private security company that was alerted by the alarm system going off," Jupiter speculated.

"If so, it sure took him a long time to show up here!" Pete looked at his watch. "Oh... not really," he quickly corrected himself. "Everything happened so quickly. It's been maybe five minutes since the alarm sounded."

At that moment, the police arrived. At her neighbour's request, Barbara had probably called them. Nevertheless, the private security officer—if he was one—had been a few moments quicker.

The police car stopped next to Jupiter and Pete. Three policemen got out, among them was Inspector Cotta. The two friends informed the officers about the arrival of the stranger. Inspector Cotta pointed to the car and confirmed their suspicion. "I know him. That's Ben Crane, head of a small security firm. He used to be in the police force himself. A good man."

The gate was still open. Jupiter and Pete were still standing by the police car parked a few metres away. That was just fine because a listening device could indeed be hidden in the vicinity of the gate. They had to be careful.

Inspector Cotta sighed as his two colleagues hurried onto Mr Faring's property. "Why am I even surprised to find you at the scene of a crime, and that you got here faster than I did? I

guess this is my fate.”

Pete tried a grin, but failed. “It wasn’t exactly all bad investigating, was it?”

“But mostly,” Cotta growled. He was clearly not in the best of moods again. “Do you know more about this?”

The First Investigator nodded eagerly. “Presumably it wasn’t a question of breaking into Mr Faring’s house, but of abduction, sir.”

“Abduction?”

Jupiter explained what had happened in the past few minutes. “Unfortunately, the licence number plate on the white SUV was smeared with dirt. The car could have left Rocky Beach in any direction by now.”

The inspector asked a few more questions. Finally, his colleagues returned together with Ben Crane, the security officer. They reported that there was no trace of an intruder on the property or in the house.

“A window was broken,” one of the policemen reported. “The culprit must have fled as soon as the alarm went off.”

Jupiter presented his version of the story: “I suspect that the person did not flee, but immediately got into the waiting car. It was one of the two abductors. They were probably just waiting for Mr Faring to come back to his house. It was a trap to pick him up by the road.”

The policemen said goodbye and got into the police car. They would take care of the abduction case—and of course Inspector Cotta stressed that the boys should stay out of it because it was ‘too dangerous now’. Just as naturally, they did not intend to abide by that warning.

Ben Crane stayed behind and the two investigators expected that he would now leave as well... but far from it. “Zach being abducted complicates everything,” he said to them. By Zach, he had to mean Zachariah Faring.

Jupiter and Pete wondered why the security officer was even starting a conversation with them. “What is complicated?” asked Jupiter. “You knew there were problems ahead of time?”

“I know a lot more.”

“Which is?” asked Pete.

Mr Crane pointed at him. “Who are you? Jupiter, Pete, or Bob?”

“Pete,” the Second Investigator replied, confused. “How do you know our names?”

“From Zach, of course. Didn’t he mention me to you?”

“He probably didn’t get around to it before the abduction,” Jupiter said. “Our conversation was far from over.”

“In that case, boys, I have a message from him to you.”

Bob looked at his watch. It was half past three. In a few moments, he would reach Rocky Beach. He steered the Beetle to the side and called Jupiter on his mobile phone. That was how he learned that his friends were still at the Mathewsons’ house.

“We’re not alone,” Jupiter pointed out. “You’ll be surprised. Don’t ask... but events have been happening here! Come and join us now!” Jupiter hung up before Bob could ask.

So Bob steered his car not home nor to the salvage yard as usual, but towards the posh neighbourhood. He parked the car just outside the Mathewsons’ house. Except for a blue Buick parked in front of the neighbouring property, there were no other cars.

Bob was not yet at the front door when Barbara opened it and came running towards him. She had tamed her brown wispy curls with two wide hair ties such that two braids bobbed to the right and left of her head with each step.

“Quick, come inside!” she called out to Bob. “You won’t believe this!”

In the living room, Jupiter and Pete sat with a tall man that Bob had never seen before. On the table were some glasses and a pitcher full of lemonade with sliced lemons—the drink Barbara always liked to serve her guests.

“Good of you to come, Bob,” said the First Investigator. “Mr Crane was just about to tell us something. But first, I think we need to bring you up to speed. As it is, Mr Faring has told Mr Crane about us, about wanting to let us in on the situation, and ask for our help.”

Bob didn’t understand much at first, but over the next few minutes, Pete told of the conversation with Barbara’s neighbour that had turned everything upside down... and of the abduction that had turned everything upside down again.

Bob was able to keep his report noticeably tighter. At least he now knew that his conclusion that Mr Faring might be the mysterious anonymous purchaser of the \$350,000 comic book had been spot on.

“And now I have some things to tell you,” Ben Crane rejoined the conversation. “Zach called me at noon today and asked for a meeting. That’s when he told me about you guys—The Three Investigators. Strange name, by the way.”

“In fact, we have solved many mysterious cases, a step ahead of the police,” Jupe explained. “We can assure you of that with a clear conscience.”

“Yeah, and I also did not realize that you were so young,” Mr Crane added.

“Age has nothing to do with investigation abilities...” Jupe said without a trace of modesty.

Mr Crane nodded. “Anyway. Zach said he was going to let you guys in on it and ask for your help—just like he asked me. So I guess we’ll be working together against this feathered creature from now on.”

“The so-called Feathered Fiend,” Bob added, feeling that after his visit to the comic book store, he knew all about this peculiar comic book series that was long forgotten by most people.

Crane grinned broadly. “All right.”

“I suppose you’ve known Mr Faring a long time if you call him ‘Zach’?” Jupe wondered.

“We grew up together,” Mr Crane elaborated. “Best friends and all. Even in the sandbox, I defended him against other kids. Zach was always a bit unworldly, as rich kids sometimes are. I mean no offence, if any of you are rich. Later, when I started my security company, he hired me from the beginning. He’s my best customer, by the way. The alarm system in his house is fantastic and I always keep it updated.”

“Still, The Feathered Fiend has invaded without setting it off,” Pete commented.

The security officer made a contrite face. “That’s exactly what I can’t figure out! But now you shall finally know what Zach was actually up to.” That, however, should be of burning interest to The Three Investigators.

“To put it bluntly, he was scared. This disguised character was putting a lot of pressure on him by invading the house, left threatening messages, and most recently smashed one of the aquariums. Unfortunately, Zach only told me everything in detail today, so I might not even have the full picture.” He shook his head. “All this while, he had let himself be intimidated. I could have stood by him from the beginning, if only he’d trusted me! After that strange message in a bottle, Zach wanted to back out. You know, disappear from the scene for a few days to be out of the line of fire, so to speak. That’s when he contacted me.”

“A decision that came a little too late,” Jupiter said regretfully.

The security officer nodded. “Now Zach has been taken... but I’ll find him.”

“We will help,” Jupiter added. “We’ll find him.”

Mr Crane nodded. “Right. He told me to give you access to this house at any time. I have all the keys, of course, and I know the codes to the alarm system.”

“One question,” Bob said. “The blackmail is about the first issue of *The Feathered Fiend*, right?”

The security officer answered in the affirmative. “Zach is a strange and secretive man,” he continued. “He loves his comic books but at the same time, he does not want the world to know that he is a fan. Why? I don’t really know, but that is his character. So when the bird-man threatened to reveal the fact that he is the owner of that expensive comic book, he freaked out.”

“Mr Faring told us he had hidden the comic book so well somewhere in this house that no burglar could find it.” Jupiter pinched his lower lip, as he often did when he was thinking sharply. “—And I’m convinced he’s given us a clue as to where we can find it, and then to keep it safe from the bird-man. He may also be afraid that the criminal will force him to reveal the hiding place while he is in captivity. That’s what we need to focus on first. Our opponent wants the comic book. If we can get it to safety, we’ll be able to outwit him. Maybe then we can get him to release Mr Faring.”

“What’s the clue you mentioned?” asked Ben Crane.

“‘From one makes two’,” Pete said. “That’s what he yelled at me during the abduction.”

“And what is that supposed to mean?” asked Barbara, who had been remarkably quiet so far.

“Some sort of coded clue,” Jupiter said. “It has to do with the message in the bottle—the comic page that the bird-man left in it. There is the exact phrase in the last frame. Barbara, did you—”

“Sure I have the message here!” she interrupted. “That’s what you mean, right? Now do you see how convenient it is that I copied the photo file and printed it out?” She pulled out her pouch. The Three Investigators were already not even surprised that she even carried it in the house.

She awkwardly pulled out a multiple-folded sheet and unfolded it. “Here it is! Listen—it’s the last frame on page eight announcing the next sequel:”

Is this the end? Not yet!!! Because now... The Feathered Fiend poses a treacherous riddle, and the police are baffled. ‘From one makes two’—what does it mean...???

“I guess that means the next story say more about this riddle,” Barbara said. “That’s no good to us though!”

Bob stood up. “Oh, yes it would! I have the whole comic book in my car.”

“You have... what?” Jupiter and Pete cried at the same time.

Bob waved it off nonchalantly. “Records and research by Bob Andrews. Part of that is always being a little better informed than everyone else. I figured we would have use for the whole comic book, not just two pages—so I’ve got a copy of it... but in case you get too excited about it, I have to mention that what I have is a reprint, not the original.”

14. The Hiding Place

A short time later, The Three Investigators, Barbara and Ben Crane read a decades-old comic story, but one that might hold the clue for them to solve a crime and save the abducted Mr Faring.

The second story was no less crazy than the first story about the blackmailed drug dealer Hank Templeton. Again The Feathered Fiend put pressure on a criminal—this time a murderer, a sinister figure named Jack Ropp, who was always drawn with a cruel smile on his lips.

In a confrontation, the bird-man asked the murderer a strange question: ‘What one creature can make two of itself?’

Ropp did not know this, and The Feathered Fiend gave the answer as the starfish. When a starfish broke off an arm, the arm would eventually regenerate into a new starfish—hence the phrase ‘from one makes two’.

“You, however, Ropp,” threatened The Feathered Fiend, “will not survive if you are cut in half!” A sinister threat, but one that the murderer did not take seriously. He showed no remorse, nor did he turn himself in to the police.

The story ended with The Feathered Fiend entering the murderer’s bedroom that night, shown only from the outside in the final frame. Written on the last frame at the bottom of the page was:

*What happens there now, we will never know! Let's cover it with the cloak of silence...
The Feathered Fiend returns in two weeks—then it's all about the Wings of Silence!!!*

“So the riddle points to a starfish,” Jupiter said. “A definite clue to the hiding place.”

“You mean—” began Pete.

“The comic book is in the aquarium,” Bob interrupted, “and Mr Faring wants us to get it out of there and put it in a safe place—probably so his abductors can’t force him to tell where it’s hidden. After all, if the comic book isn’t there now, he won’t know where it is himself.”

“That doesn’t sound very sensible,” Barbara interjected. “Storing a comic book underwater?”

“In a watertight container.” The First Investigator turned, looked through the window towards Mr Faring’s house. “Somewhere in the giant aquarium in the basement.”

“And how are we to get at it?” asked Bob.

Pete grinned. “Ever heard of scuba diving?”

“In a tank full of barracudas? Good idea, Pete, but are you for real?”

“Uh... yeah, I hadn’t thought of that,” Pete gulped. “Now that I think about it, these predators suddenly make a lot more sense than they did before. They’re sort of special guard dogs for a \$350,000 comic book. Am I the only one who thinks this is crazy?”

Ben Crane laughed. “In fact, it’s the craziest thing I’ve ever heard... but it also sounds logical. It fits Zach and his somewhat quirky nature. It’s how he combined his two great passions. So come on, let’s go over and see.” He tapped his pocket, where a thick set of keys jingled.

“You all go on,” Bob said. “I’m going after another lead.”

“And what would that be?” Barbara asked with wide eyes.

“I’m trying to figure out who might be behind the bird-man character,” Bob said. “It has to be someone who wants the comic book badly... also, someone who doesn’t need to steal other things from the house... in other words, someone who doesn’t care about money because he has enough of it himself! Maybe it was one of the competitors who wanted to buy the comic book at the auction back then. Don’t you think that’s obvious?”

“Quite,” Jupiter admitted. “That must be someone who knows that Mr Faring bought the comic book. After all, the result of the auction was never made public. So it’s another mystery to be solved.”

Barbara looked at Bob excitedly. “How are you going to find out who was bidding then?”

“I have my ways,” Bob replied with a smile.

“I’ll help you!” cried Barbara. “Surely you could use a good assistant.”

Bob’s smile diminished a little. “Uh-huh...” he murmured.

“And to prove to you that I can be very useful,” said Barbara triumphantly, “I present you with this.” This time she drew a piece of paper not from her pouch, but from her trouser pocket. She laid it on the table. Quite a few numbers were written on it.

“What’s that?” asked Pete, reading aloud: “03, 11, 77, 22, 06, 74... What are these numbers?”

“I don’t know,” Barbara admitted, “but what you didn’t catch earlier was that Mr Faring put this note on the table while we were talking. He was probably going to talk about it later, but the alarm went off so he didn’t get a chance.”

Jupiter took the paper. “Indeed, this could be important. Perhaps it’s the combination to a safe.”

Pete rolled his eyes. “—Or the number of his fish and crabs, who knows?”

Because they wanted to split up, they each made a copy of the numbers. Who knew when and where the numbers would come in handy?

Jupiter also took the reprint of the old comic book and put it in the back pocket of his trousers. Perhaps there was another clue in the story about the riddle that could be revealed later.

Bob resigned himself to his fate that Barbara would not leave his side while his friends launched ‘Mission Aquarium’ with Mr Crane.

There was no time to lose. The leads were hot and their mysterious opponent was sure to have a few surprises up his sleeve. The sooner The Three Investigators acted, the better—especially for the abducted Mr Faring. The friends were not at all comfortable when they imagined how he might fare in the hands of the unscrupulous criminals.

Jupiter, Pete and Ben Crane left the Mathewsons’ house. In the doorway, a beaming Barbara waved after them, having accompanied the three to the exit.

The First Investigator turned to his companions. “We must be careful. There’s a good chance there are bugs hidden on Mr Faring’s property and in the house. We can’t talk freely there because our opponent may be listening in.”

The other two nodded.

“Before we go, I have one question,” Pete said. “Mr Crane, what exactly do you know about the house? Particularly about the security arrangements? I’m still trying to understand how the bird-man got past the alarm system. Every detail could be important.”

The security officer pointed over the hedge at the house. “The layout is extremely good, making it extremely difficult to outsmart. Zach has made security a top priority. There’s even

a panic room.”

“Mr Faring has a panic room?” asked the Second Investigator. He was, of course, not unfamiliar with the term.

A panic room was a kind of private bunker, a hidden room in the house that was specially secured. It was meant to be a place where occupants could retreat from criminals in the event of an intrusion. The doors were usually as secure as those of a safe and the room was completely self-contained. It had everything necessary for survival, such as its own power supply, water, lights, and usually a telephone to call for help.

“Yes, a specially designed panic room,” Mr Crane explained. “Perhaps you know that the giant aquarium has a special concrete foundation in the floor because of the weight of the water? The panic room is built into this foundation. You can enter it from the basement through a hidden door.”

“So it is underground?” asked Jupe.

“Exactly—and what’s also special is that there’s not just one entrance. There’s a small escape tunnel from the panic room to the boundary of the property, where there’s a hidden exit in the shed where the garden tools are kept. This exit is also secured, of course.”

“Sounds like extreme paranoia,” Pete remarked.

“Zach is... extreme, yes.”

Jupiter was burning with thirst for action. He urgently wanted to go into the house and search the aquarium for the hiding place of possibly a watertight container with the valuable comic book.

They agreed to talk only what was necessary when in the house—and very quietly, so that any listening devices couldn’t pick it up. The first thing they wanted to do was to thoroughly search the basement with the aquarium for bugs.

Ben Crane unlocked the gate to the property and closed it again behind them. They walked past the hedges trimmed in the shape of sea creatures and shortly, they entered the house. Without further words, they made their way to the basement stairs and descended.

The massive aquarium caught their eyes just as it had the first time. It still amazed them. The two boys wondered if the comic book was really hidden in this aquarium. Now, on the spot, this idea seemed a lot crazier to them. They felt a little queasy at the sight of the thin predatory fish floating lazily in the water. For the first time, they wondered how the barracudas were fed. That was certainly the job of Thomas Malone, the aquarium serviceman.

The three of them marched through the basement, keeping their eyes peeled for tiny hidden listening devices somewhere.

Jupiter pointed to the grey box on the wall beside the door at the foot of the stairs.

“What’s that?” he whispered to Ben Crane. “Some controls for the aquarium?”

The security officer shook his head. “It’s for the entrance to that... uh... ‘place’ I told you about,” he said just as quietly. “You have to enter some codes.”

Meanwhile, Pete found a gadget while crawling around on the floor and looking between two closely spaced storage cabinets. It was a bug about the size of the nail on his little finger. Beneath it was a tiny but apparently very effective speaker possibly from which the screech of birds had sounded. The whole thing looked like expensive super-technology. So the bird-man didn’t really seem to care about money.

Pete plucked the two devices from the wall. They had been attached with a small hook behind the loose back panel of the right-hand cabinet. The Second Investigator thought for a moment, then tossed the speaker and microphone into the aquarium. There they would be damaged by the water, but without much noise as would be made if he threw them on the floor and stepped on them.

After a while, the three of them didn't find anything else.

"Let's hope we can speak freely," Jupiter said in a lowered voice. To play it safe, they stood close together again. "Now we'll take a closer look at the aquarium. Look for where a watertight container might be hidden. Under the sand? In the rocks on the bottom?"

A shrill sound echoed through the room. Jupiter and Pete looked around, startled.

"Don't worry," Ben Crane said. "It's just my beeper." He pulled a device out of his pants pocket that resembled a mobile phone that was a little too big. He tapped it, eyed the readout on a display. "Excuse me, I've got to go! There's an emergency with another client."

"But—" Pete began.

"You'll be fine here on your own in the house. If need be, you can just leave through the main door. You don't need me here." Mr Crane was already hurrying up the stairs. "I'll get back to you as soon as I can. I hope this is just a false alarm."

The next moment, Pete and Jupiter were alone in the huge basement with the aquarium.

While the Second Investigator circled the aquarium and kept a lookout, Jupiter went into the winding tunnel that led to the middle of the aquarium. Reaching the end, he sat down on the chair and thought while fish swam all around him. A water snail hung seemingly within reach next to his face.

"From one makes two," he muttered to himself. Sometimes it helped to just speak his thoughts. "A starfish... a special way of reproducing... where do starfish particularly hang out in the aquarium?" He could hardly find an answer to the last question, as thumbnail-sized, white-grey starfish stuck to the inside of the glass walls in all sorts of places. Given the size of the aquarium, there must have been several hundreds of them...

Jupiter faltered. He stood up, put both hands against the outer glass, which was warmed by the water behind it. Suddenly, he saw something!

"Pete, come here," he said quietly—after all, they had no way of knowing if there wasn't another hidden microphone. Not five seconds later, his friend was with him.

"I found it!" The First Investigator whispered. He didn't need to give any more explanations. What lay before them was clear enough.

To their right and left, porous rock covered the bottom of the aquarium. In some places, paper-thin tentacles of brittle stars protruded and swayed in the current. But directly in front of them, there was an empty space at the bottom of the aquarium, a good hand's width deeper than the surrounding rocks. This space was covered with a layer of sand... and it was shaped like a star.

A starfish!

15. The Other Bidders

Bob waited tensely while the phone rang—once... twice... three times...

“Answer it,” he muttered, as if he could implore his call to be answered. Instead, Reggie’s the voice-mail came up. Frustrated, Bob hung up and immediately dialled again.

Again it rang through.

“Yes?” said a rushed-sounding voice unexpectedly.

“Reggie? It’s Bob! You know, I met you at the comic book store.”

“Sure.”

Bob gave Barbara, who was sitting across the table from him, an upraised thumb. “I can’t get that auction out of my mind. Do you know who bid on that comic book back then?”

“Well, it wasn’t me.” Reggie laughed. “I should have got out at a hundred bucks or so. Anyway, I remember Firehead wanted that comic book badly.”

Firehead? That must have been a nickname or some kind of honorific for a particular, well-known collector. Bob was probably better off not admitting he didn’t know who that person was. “Do you know anyone else?”

“Why are you so interested in that?”

“I’m just fascinated by the series and its history,” Bob stretched the truth quite a bit.

“Now that I’ve read this reprint, I find it all that much more interesting.”

“I understand Miriam Levine also bid,” Reggie continued. “Yes, she did, she made the highest bid on the spot.”

“Do you know either of them personally?”

Reggie let out a laugh. “Well, that’s just the way you know collector idols. Why don’t you ask Timothy Jackson? He sort of knows all and sundry.”

Timothy Jackson—Mr Dreadlocks, the shop owner—of course, that was a good idea, although he had proved very buttoned up during the first conversation. There was no harm in a second attempt. “Will do. Thanks, Reggie.”

“You’re welcome.”

Bob said goodbye and hung up. He had made notes during the phone call and looked at the two names—as far as the first one could be called a name.

Firehead and Miriam Levine were apparently well-known and wealthy comic book collectors. Could one of them actually be The Feathered Fiend who wanted to steal a rival’s possession? Who went so far as to break into houses, commit property damage, blackmail and then abduct Mr Faring?

“I need to get on the Internet,” Bob said.

Barbara led him into her room where the computer was already running. Bob opened a search engine and first typed in ‘Miriam Levine’. The number of hits nearly overwhelmed him. He entered ‘comic book’ as another keyword and clicked through the results.

Soon it became clear who the real Miriam Levine was. She presented her collection on her own home page, which had a page counter in the upper right-hand corner—currently with over ten million views. “Not bad,” Bob muttered.

He also found out the real name of the comic book collector Firehead. It was a certain Chip Lange from New York.

“So there we have two names,” said Barbara, who was extremely comfortable in the role of Bob’s temporary assistant. “The question is are we suspecting them?”

“I can’t be sure yet,” Bob conceded, “but they’ve at least had an interest in this particular comic book, and they know their way around well enough to pressure Mr Faring in this crazy way.”

Barbara flicked the thumb and middle finger of both hands. “So we need more information. It’s now 5 pm. How long is that comic book store open?”

“Until eight o’clock at night during weekdays... so three more hours.”

“What are you waiting for, Bob? Make the call, or do you want me to do it for you?”

No way, Bob thought. “I’ll handle it.” He pulled up the comic book store’s page and dialled the phone number.

This time, someone answered almost immediately. “Comics Number 1, this is Timothy.”

Bob literally saw the man with the dreadlocks in front of him. “Mr Jackson, this is Bob. I stopped by your store today and bought the reprint of *The Feathered Fiend*.”

“Sure, I remember. What’s up? Was the comic book damaged? You know if the condition isn’t as stated, you can always get in touch. We’ll find a solution then.”

“No, it’s fine.” Bob thought about the comic book that was now in Jupiter’s back pocket. There was no question of the condition it was in now, but he didn’t care. That wasn’t what mattered. “I just find the whole story about the auction so fascinating.”

Mr Dreadlocks was silent.

“I know you can’t tell me who bought the comic book...” On an impulse, he added, to make the shop owner curious: “—Though I have a hunch.”

“So, do you?” Timothy Jackson sounded amused.

“I’d like to talk to one of the other bidders—Chip Lange or Miriam Levine, maybe.”

“Ha, you really know your stuff,” Timothy remarked, “although I didn’t think so this morning.”

“Who doesn’t know Firehead?” asked Bob. When the words were out, he told himself not to push the game too far. Actually, he was leaning just far enough out the window that he had to be careful not to fall off.

“You can easily contact Miriam through her homepage.”

“I know, but I was thinking... well, you kind of know everyone and maybe you can arrange a meeting?”

“A meeting? With Miriam? Boy, you’re good. Why don’t you ask me to take Stan Lee and you out for coffee right now?”

Although Bob didn’t know much, he knew who Stan Lee was—the creator of such famous characters as Spider-Man and the X-Men. “Well, there’s a slight difference between Stan Lee and Miriam Levine,” Bob said weakly.

“True! Miriam’s prettier.” Mr Jackson laughed. “But you know what? You’re in luck. When can you be here?”

The sudden change of subject stunned Bob. “One hour at the latest.”

“Good! Then get in your car. Miriam has announced a visit here for tonight of all nights. I’ve bought up a huge collection from an estate. She wants to look at everything.”

Bob thanked him, promised to come, and hung up.

Barbara had been listening in over the loudspeaker. “That’s what I call a coincidence,” she said.

“Why can’t I get lucky once in a while?” Bob said.

The two of them got into Bob’s Beetle. For the second time that day, Bob set off for Los Angeles.

As they approached the junction where he almost crashed, a chill ran over him. Quickly he told Barbara what had happened.

“Be extra careful there in a minute,” she said.

“Why? It’s no more dangerous there than anywhere else.”

“You think so? Strange attitude.”

Bob, on the other hand, found Barbara’s remark strange, but he said nothing about it.

Around a quarter to six, he was able to steer the Beetle into the car park in front of Comics Number 1.

He was about to pull into one of the many empty car park spaces when he hesitated. “I don’t believe it.”

“What is it?” asked his companion.

“There... right by the building—a white SUV.” Instead of parking right away, Bob steered his car towards it to take a closer look. “A Chevrolet.”

Barbara understood at once what he was driving at. “You don’t think this is the car in which Mr Faring was abducted in, do you?” It sounded joyfully excited rather than fearful. She was feverish about getting into an adventure. “That would definitely be too much of a coincidence now, don’t you think? First this Miriam Levine comes here tonight of all nights, and then this?”

Bob did not answer but looked around. There was no one to be seen. He parked his car and both of them got out. Then, in as inconspicuous as possible, they walked over to the white SUV to check it out.

“At some point,” Bob told Barbara, “if there’s too much coincidence involved, it smells like an exact plan. Look at this—the windows of the car are tinted, just as Pete said.”

“That’s true of a lot of white Chevys, though,” Barbara remarked.

Bob examined the licence plate. It was not completely smeared with dirt, but there were still remnants stuck to it. He believed less and less in a coincidence—only he still didn’t understand how exactly everything was connected.

“Now you stay very still, do you hear me?” a muffled voice suddenly came from behind the two of them.

Bob whirled around and saw a bald man. He was so scrawny that the T-shirt flapped against his body. This had to be ‘the fellow with the bald head in the antiquarian section’ Timothy Jackson had mentioned earlier in the day.

That didn’t matter, though. Much more important was the gun in his right hand, which he pointed at Bob and Barbara.

16. Barbara Freaks Out!

“The starfish...” Jupiter whispered, “even though it’s not a real one. Actually, you can’t miss it once you spot it.”

The two friends were still standing in the narrow, winding tunnel in the middle of the aquarium.

“So now we know where the comic book is hidden... or at least where it could be,” Pete added. “The question is how to recover it.”

“Simple,” Jupe replied. “We have to dive... or rather, you have to dive.”

“What?” The Second Investigator stared at his friend. “And why me of all people?”

“Because you’re the sporty one of the two of us.”

Pete drummed his fingers against the glass. At the bottom, a crab scurried away. “That may be so, but I’m certainly not going into a tank of predatory fish. You might as well put me in a pit of fat, hairy spiders!” He shook himself.

“You don’t have to worry about the barracudas,” Jupiter assured him.

“Oh, yeah? Well, Thomas Malone disagreed with you when you wanted to reach into the tank to get out the bottle with the message.”

“That was where the barracudas were,” Jupe countered.

“If I dive in there, they’ll smell a tasty dinner and turn me into spicy Pete purée real quick. Forget it!”

“I’ve thought this thing through,” Jupiter explained. “The barracudas can’t swim into every part of the aquarium. Probably because if they did, they’d eat all the other critters of this underwater world. Just look at it, there’s a fine metal grate over there, overgrown with aquatic plants. That keeps the barracudas from this section.”

Pete had to agree with his friend. “That’s a point.”

Still, diving in the aquarium isn’t exactly a pleasant idea. Here a spidery something stalked over the rocks, there a crab scraped its claws over a snail shell. On the sandy surface in the shape of a starfish itself were a dozen tiny red shrimp, wiggling their rumps on scrawny little legs like a group of dancers, except it didn’t look graceful at all. Pete shuddered when he imagined diving there and having to be careful not to crush the animals.

But all procrastination did not help, that was clear to Pete. So he slipped out of his clothes until he only had his underpants on. Jupiter clasped his hands together to give Pete a leg-up to reach for the top of the outer glass wall. He shuddered as his arm slowly went into the water and he found that the water was pleasantly warm. A nearby school of lemon yellow fish swam away quickly. Then he hesitated and darted his gaze in the direction of the metal grate looking out for the barracudas.

“Pete,” groaned Jupiter, still propping up his friend, “you’re not supposed to be sightseeing up there!”

The Second Investigator tried to somehow hold on to the glass wall, which was very thin for this purpose. It was not so easy. For a moment, he swayed and almost fell off, then he splashed not very elegantly into the water. He tightened his arms and legs to avoid getting tangled in the water plants that floated on the surface.

Pete took a deep breath before he let himself slide down. He landed toe first on the sandy surface and sank first to his feet, then to his knees. The tiny red shrimp hopped away with funny looking jumps.

Pete's eyes burned a little in the salt water, but he was used to that from the open sea. Only now did he notice that there were some slimy threads of algae hanging between his fingers. He must have torn them off on his way down. No matter! He could not dwell on such trivialities. Now it was about more important things!

Was there actually a watertight container buried there? He dug his hands into the sand and pushed it aside. Dense, yellow-brown clouds billowed up and sank back. Pete continued to dig. Suddenly something wriggled between his fingers. It was a stick-shaped fish which was apparently living in a burrow in the sand. The Second Investigator pushed the animal rudely aside. Slowly he was running out of air. Pete kept digging and reached the glass bottom of the aquarium. There was nothing!

Hastily, he continued to dig to the right and left of the exposed area. There, too, he reached the glass bottom. Again, there was nothing! Surely this could not be true.

Pete's thoughts faltered as he continued to dig and sweep the sand aside. Had they made a mistake? Was Mr Faring's basic 'From one makes two' clue possibly aimed at something completely different? Maybe there was a starfish statue in his house or something equally crazy. Out in the garden, weren't the hedges trimmed in the shape of sea creatures? Maybe they should have looked there first. Then he could have saved himself this whole dive.

Just as he was about to give up, he spotted something—not in or under the sand, but under the glass pane that formed the bottom of the aquarium. Thin clouds of sand were still floating in the water above, but Pete could still see through the glass. Beneath it was some sort of a rectangular compartment about the size of a drawer. Was there something in it? Something dark? He couldn't quite make it out under the clouds of sand.

Pete pushed aside more sand as spellbound as he was cautious. There was no doubt about it. He had discovered a secret compartment—only he couldn't access it from the aquarium. He would have to find an opening from below. How could that be possible? The aquarium must have weighed tonnes and...

The Second Investigator couldn't think any longer. He had to breathe. So he pushed himself off and shot up. Above his head, he grabbed the edge of the glass, clutched it, and pulled himself up. His head pierced the surface, and he took a deep breath.

"Did you find anything?" asked Jupiter.

"You bet!" Pete pulled himself laboriously over the edge. For a moment, he thought he heard the glass walls creak alarmingly. He was already imagining the glass shattering and him not only landing on a pile of broken glass, but tens of thousands of litres of water spilling out into the open along with all the inhabitants.

Luckily the glass held. Pete shimmied down the outside and stood soaking wet next to Jupiter. Water dripped from his hair. He stroked his body dry in a makeshift manner.

"There's a secret compartment below the spot where the starfish is," he explained to his friend, "not inside the aquarium, but under it."

"But that doesn't make any sense. How could anyone—" Jupiter faltered in mid-sentence as Pete slipped on his T-shirt. The Second Investigator was still so wet that the fabric stuck to his body. No matter. Pete pulled on his pants and shoes.

"Hold on!" Jupiter exclaimed. "There is definitely a way to get there. Ben Crane told us about it. Remember? There's a concrete foundation under the aquarium, and there's a panic room built into that foundation. Surely there's an access to the secret compartment from there!"

Pete tousled his hair. Droplets of water slapped against the glass walls all around. “So all we have to do is break into the panic room, which, with Mr Faring’s obsession with security, should be better secured than a bank vault. Doesn’t sound like much of a walk in the park.”

“... Unless we know the combination to open the panic room!”

“Yeah, if only we know them... Wait a minute!” Pete exclaimed. “We do know them! You’re right!”

Jupiter pulled from his pocket the piece of paper that Mr Faring had left on Barbara’s kitchen table—the one with a bunch of numbers. “He probably wanted to give them to us so we could go into secured areas in the house, including the panic room! Where could there be a better place to hide his valuable items?”

The two friends immediately rushed to the grey control box on the wall next to the door. Before they got to do anything, they suddenly heard something loud upstairs in the house. First it was a piercing, shrill screech of birds... then footsteps came closer and closer.

The Feathered Fiend was coming towards the basement!

Bob stared at the gun in the skinny, bald man’s hand. He raised his arms. “Take it easy, will you? We are not here to cause trouble.”

“You two come with me now! I’m sure your friend Mr Faring would be happy to have company in his cell! There you can tell him how you stumbled like fools into the trap Timothy set for you.”

Timothy? So the owner of the comic book store was behind this? Bob’s mind was racing, but he didn’t get to think any further. For one thing, he was far too frightened... and for another, Barbara began to scream! She staggered back, bumping her back against the white SUV, threw her arms around frantically, drumming her fists against the windows and the roof of the car. She looked completely hysterical.

“Stop it!” the bald man yelled at her.

“Put the gun down! Help! I’m so scared! Please! Don’t shoot me! We haven’t done anything!” Barbara babbled on and on, even sinking to her knees and falling to the ground.

The man turned to Bob and instructed: “Get her up and make her stop screaming, or else _____”

That was as far as he got. While he was facing Bob, with his eyes away from Barbara, she suddenly sprang forward and grabbed the man’s legs with such force that he lost his footing and fell backwards. His arm slammed against the white Chevrolet, and the gun flew close to Bob’s feet. Then the back of their opponent’s head hit the hard pavement and he rolled to the side, groaning.

Barbara scooted back and stood up laughing. “I sure showed you!”

Bob grabbed the gun. “We’re out of here! Come on, Barbara, get in the Beetle!”

They both ran to the car before their stunned opponent was back on his feet. Bob tossed the gun onto the back seat, slammed the gear into reverse and screeched out of the car park space. He spun the steering wheel around, shifted gears, and roared off. In the rearview mirror, he saw their opponent get back to his feet, still stunned.

“That was amazing!” Bob said to Barbara as they sped out of the car park and merged into traffic.

The sun came up on her face. “I made it up on the spur of the moment. Oh, me, the poor frightened girl!” She laughed. “That was like something out of a bad movie, huh?”

“A super performance! But also darn dangerous. What if he had shot?”

“But he didn’t!”

Bob stopped at a red light. His heart was still pounding. “We need to call the police. Mr Faring is probably locked in somewhere in the comic book store.”

“I don’t have a mobile phone.”

Bob handed her his, and she called the police.

Meanwhile, Bob steered the Beetle to the side of the road. They couldn’t just drive away. Until the police arrived, they had to watch the premises. Apparently, at least the store owner, Timothy ‘Dreadlocks’ Jackson, and his bald employee were in cahoots. What if the criminals were now trying to get the abducted Mr Faring away from the premises, or even just trying to escape themselves?

Barbara finished her conversation. “The police will be here soon. Five, ten minutes tops, the officer said.”

Bob took advantage of a gap in the traffic to make a U-turn, and rolled back towards the comic book store. “And I hope that’s how long we have to keep our eyes open.”

Barbara half rose and bent backward toward the back seat.

“What are you doing?” asked Bob.

“Well what do you think? I’m going for the gun! Who knows if we’ll need it.”

“Can you even handle that?”

She grinned audaciously. “Actually, no, though I did go for target practice with my dad once... but our opponents won’t need to know that—”

17. Who Gets the Comic Book?

The two friends looked at each other in horror. They had been so close—and now this!

“Quick, close the door!” shouted Jupiter.

Pete ran towards the stairs, grabbed the door—and just then, saw the horror figure of the bird-man hurrying down the steps. Even up close, the costume looked creepy. The entire body was covered in green and yellow feathers. Mighty wings sat under the arms. The face looked the scariest—a pointed beak below two dark, menacing spots around the eyes. Indeed, this was The Feathered Fiend—like something out of the comic books!

However, Pete was not intimidated. He threw the door in the bird-man’s face and then locked the door with the little push button... but the lock would probably not last long. A few powerful kicks and the door could give way. In any case, their opponent could be expected to do anything.

“We need to get to the panic room quick,” Jupiter said deliberately calmly. They couldn’t lose their nerves now. “Pete, I’ll read you the combination.”

The Second Investigator stood in front of the grey control box. He opened the cover and saw a control panel that, according to Ben Crane, would open the entrance to the panic room. There was a small LCD panel and a keypad with buttons for the numbers ‘0’ to ‘9’, and an ‘Enter’ button. Fortunately, the system was simple and easy to understand. Now he only need to enter the numbers...

“03...” Jupiter said, and Pete pressed the two numbers followed by the ‘Enter’ button.

Outside, The Feathered Fiend pounded on the door. His cawing came loudly up to them—a noise that sounded like a rusty saw scraping on sandpaper. No wonder this trademark of The Feathered Fiend had caused fear and panic in the comic stories.

“11...” the First Investigator continued, “77, 22...”

“Slow down,” Pete pleaded. His fingers trembled slightly.

“Open up!” their opponent screeched from the doorway. “I’m gonna get you! You cannot escape!” The next moment, a blow thundered against the door, making it tremble.

“What was the last number?” asked Pete, slightly panicked.

“22...” Jupiter repeated. “Then 06...”

“Stop,” cried Pete. “That’s it!”

“Already? There are more numbers—” Now Jupiter had heard it too—there was a clacking in one corner of the basement. A part of the floor clanged away revealing a trapdoor.

From where they stood, the two friends could see only a dark entrance. Immediately, they ran towards it. They would be safe in the panic room. The Feathered Fiend couldn’t follow them there—at least not that fast... unless he knew the combination as well. Hopefully, he had not been able to listen in.

The door shook after another kick. The wood cracked and the lock creaked.

A ladder began under the open entrance in the corner of the basement. Jupiter went down first, and Pete hastily followed. Shortly they were standing on a bare concrete floor. Only through the entrance did some light come in.

Up in the basement there was a splintering and crashing sound. The two friends recognized the sound. The lock was broken, the door slammed against the wall.

Pete spotted a large, red and obvious button on the wall. Of course—there had to be a quick way to close the entrance if they took refuge in the panic room. Pete pounded on the button.

A whirring sounded and the trapdoor closed. The last thing they heard were footsteps, and the last thing they saw was the feathered face with the pointed beak bending over the ever-shrinking gap.

Then the entrance slammed shut. All of a sudden it was pitch dark. There were several clicks and clacks as the entrance to the panic room locked.

The two boys stood with hammering hearts in complete darkness. It took only a few seconds, then light flared up on the ceiling. A cold fluorescent light illuminated the room down to the last corner.

“All right, let’s go searching.” Jupiter tried to sound as calm as possible while above them the bird-man pounded on the locked entrance.

“You’re really going to look for the comic book now?”

“What else?” asked Jupiter.

“Maybe call the police?”

“Then you do it,” said the First Investigator. “I’ll look for the comic book.”

The First Investigator looked around. The room was unadorned and bare, but then beauty wasn’t the point of a panic room. Only in one corner was a comfortable armchair and a reading lamp. Strange...

The room was less than half the size of the basement above. Jupiter saw a dusty crate of water bottles and a few cans of food on a shelf. Quite a few steel columns and beams stood like ugly pillars in the room or ran under the ceiling. They began about where the aquarium was above them.

“There is no mobile phone reception down here,” Pete said anxiously after fiddling with his mobile phone. “It must be the thick concrete foundation and walls.”

“See where the landline phone is,” Jupiter replied. “There must be one somewhere—it’s part of a panic room, so you can call for help even if you get stuck here.”

Jupiter searched the ceiling. Sure enough, some time later, he found a grey box in between two steel beams. It was strikingly similar to the one next to the basement door. He pulled Mr Faring’s note from his trouser pocket and looked at the numbers. There were twelve in total. Pete had used four numbers to open the panic room door? There are eight left, which could mean that the next four could be for opening this secret compartment. Then, the remaining four could well be for a third grey box somewhere else. Perhaps it is for the exit to the garden shed at the end of the escape tunnel! In any case, he had to open this secret compartment first.

“Indeed!” exclaimed Pete, relieved. “There’s a phone, next to the table at the corner.” And, seconds later, he exclaimed: “Damn! The line’s dead!”

The Feathered Fiend obviously knew his way around the house and had cut the connection. How had he managed to do that?

Jupiter continued to concentrate on his task—and he succeeded! There was a click followed by a whirr, and then a flap about thirty by thirty centimetres in size opened a gap downwards. The First Investigator was able to pull it further down to gain access to the secret compartment.

It was at that moment that he realized why the cosy armchair was down here—he could well imagine Mr Faring sometimes coming down here, taking his precious comic book out of hiding and leafing through it devoutly in the light of the reading lamp.

Now the First Investigator looked up into the secret compartment and he saw the glass ceiling—above which lay bits of sand. The places where he could see through to the water were where Pete had swept the sand off earlier. He could even see a small shrimp swimming across.

Was that all there was? Jupiter couldn't see into the whole secret compartment. So he felt around in the hiding place with one arm stretched over his head. His fingers found something hard and he pulled out a case.

It was a corrugated plastic case that was black, flat, and rectangular of a size slightly bigger than a piece of A4 paper. There was a latch on one side which he hastily undid. In it was a clear polyester bag which looked like a sturdy heavy-duty Mylar bag.

... And there it was—the comic book he was looking for!

“Bloody Feathers!” Jupiter read with satisfaction. At first glance, it looked exactly like the reprint Bob had purchased for a few dollars.

Jupe reached into his back pocket and pulled out Bob's reprint. He held it next to the original and he could see that it was the same size as well. Only the paper had a different colour—obviously because of the age of the original comic book.

Pete came over excitedly. “Have you found it?”

“Of course!” Jupe remarked and showed his friend the comic book.

“Great!” Pete exclaimed. “Now what? How are we going to get it to safety?”

Meanwhile, there was no sound from the entrance, but that was anything but a guarantee that their opponent was no longer lurking there. If they opened the door, they were taking a huge risk.

“The escape tunnel!” Jupe cried as it seemed much safer to choose the route mentioned by Ben Crane to get outside via the garden shed. “You go look for the tunnel while I close the secret compartment.”

After a brief moment, Pete called out: “Found it!” There was no mistaking the tunnel. It was a dead straight passageway that led past the steel columns on the side. Only a few bare lights on the ceiling illuminated the narrow tunnel.

“Come on, Jupe!” Pete cried. “Let's get going!” He led the way into the tunnel, while Jupe, clutching the black rectangular case, followed a short distance behind. The way seemed to them to take forever. Was Mr Faring's property really that big?

Finally, they reached the end. There, a staircase apparently led to a trapdoor at the top. As expected, there was another grey box on the wall. Jupiter opened the cover and entered the last four numbers. Immediately, the trapdoor above them opened.

“Let's get out of here,” he said with satisfaction.

They came out to a dark room. This had to be the garden shed as on all sides were the silhouettes of garden tools. The outline of a large riding lawn mower crouched in one corner like a monster.

The next moment, the door of the shed opened with a creak. Although it had long turned dark outside, a bright rectangle of light fell on the ground from a street lamp looming behind the hedge.

The two friends were blinded for a moment. Then they saw the feathered figure of their opponent.

“You can't escape!” The words sounded dully from under the beak of the face mask. “Give me the comic book!”

“No way,” Pete said. The two friends were still standing in the semi-dark area of the shed, about three steps away from their opponent.

“Yes, Pete,” Jupiter objected. “We don’t stand a chance now. We can’t get away from here.”

“But Jupe—”

“Shut up! Give me that comic book, or else—” Their opponent left the rest of the threat unspoken.

“All right.” Jupiter held up the black rectangular case, opened it, and took out the comic book. Then he held it in his outstretched hand with the cover facing the bird-man. At the same time, he let the case drop to the ground.

The Feathered Fiend took a step closer and was about to grab the comic book when the First Investigator withdrew his hand. “Before I give this to you,” Jupiter said, “whoever you are under that mask, you’ve made a mistake.”

A muffled laugh came from the bird-man. “And what would that be?”

“Now we are sure that you’re after this comic book—this one, irreplaceable comic book. It’s not like money, but an antique—like a work of art that no one can replace once it’s been destroyed. And you know what?” Jupiter now reached out with his other hand, passing the comic book between his right and left hand.

The bird-man was petrified. “What are you doing?” His voice sounded terrified. “Stop that right now!”

“You’ll never have this comic book!” cried Jupiter triumphantly. “If I can’t have it, then no one else can!”

With these words, Jupe grasped the comic book with both hands and tore it in half!

18. The Feathers Fall

Bob parked his Beetle opposite the entrance to the car park. From here he could see the white SUV clearly without being immediately seen. After all, the Chevrolet was still parked in the same spot. However, there was no sign of the scrawny criminal.

Bob and Barbara waited. The seconds ticked by endlessly. How long could the five to ten minutes be before the police finally arrived? To Bob, it seemed as if the call had been made hours ago. The fact that Barbara was sitting next to him with a gun in her hand didn't exactly reassure him. At least she was careful not to point it at him.

It came as it had to come. The scrawny guy came back, unlocked the SUV and got in.

"This can't be happening!" Bob started the engine. If the criminal left the car park, he would have to follow him to give the police directions.

However, the Chevy didn't drive off the car park yet. Instead, it rolled closer to the entrance to the comic book store.

"They probably want to get poor Mr Faring into the car first," Barbara said.

From where they were waiting, however, they could not see what was going on at the entrance. Bob and Barbara considered getting out. The decision wasn't easy for them—on the one hand, there were far better observation positions; on the other hand, they could get caught if they crept closer on foot, not to mention the fact that they couldn't follow the Chevy suddenly speeding away if they weren't in the Beetle themselves.

The decision was taken away from them when not one, but three police cars roared up. They dispensed with the red and blue lights and sirens so as not to draw immediate attention to themselves.

Bob breathed a sigh of relief. Barbara yanked open the passenger door.

"What?" Bob exclaimed.

"Well, do you think I'm going to miss this?" Barbara was already standing in the open. "Come on! Or shall I go alone?"

While the first two police cars turned into the car park and the third took up position in front, Bob and Barbara hurried across the street, ran past the third police car and into the car park. Then they heard a car door slam behind them, and a female voice called out: "Hey you two! Where are you going? Hold it right there!"

They stopped in their tracks, but were just in time to see how the policemen overpowered the scrawny man who had threatened them with a gun earlier—the gun of which was in Barbara's hand. A second man, noticeably taller and more muscular man, was also apprehended. He had just tried to push Mr Faring, who had a gag in his mouth and shackles around his hands, into the SUV.

Barbara's eyes sparkled. However, when one of the policemen came up to her and looked at her sternly, she slumped down.

"Where did you get that gun?" the policeman asked the girl. "Drop it now!"

Barbara obeyed, and Bob experienced a miracle—she was completely speechless. "I can explain," he said on her behalf.

The policeman nodded. "I certainly hope so for the both of you..."

Jupiter threw away one half of the comic book, grabbed the other half, and tore it again. Then he hurled the shreds into their opponent's feathered face.

Pete groaned. He couldn't believe what Jupiter had just done—he had destroyed a \$350,000 comic book!

The Feathered Fiend cried out, staggered a step forward, stretched out his arms helplessly. He had lost all aggression and turned into a wingless homing pigeon... Only this state of shock would not last long!

"Get him, Pete!" Jupe charged forward. He rammed into the bird-man in such a way that the opponent staggered backwards and crashed into the door frame.

Now the bird-man tried to fight back, but Pete grabbed him by both arms while Jupiter ripped The Feathered Fiend's beak off his face. It felt hard and cold, obviously made of sturdy plastic or even metal parts. Fabric ripped and feathers tumbled across the room.

Underneath, the lower half of a face contorted in rage appeared. All at once their opponent seemed to regain his composure. He rammed his elbow hard into Pete's midriff. Gasping with pain, the Second Investigator loosened his grip and fell into a host of garden tools. Shovels and rakes crashed to the ground with him.

The Feathered Fiend turned and rushed for the door, but he had made the calculation without Jupiter. The First Investigator got hold of one of his wings, clung to it and tugged. Feathers flew through the air, but the suit itself didn't rip. Their opponent staggered backwards, right towards Pete, who was just pushing himself up out of all the chaos.

Quick-witted, the Second Investigator grabbed the wooden handle of a rake and swung it hard against the back of the knees of The Feathered Fiend. The bird-man rowed his arms, got hold of a shelf, and pulled it over. The shelf contents fell out, and a large flower pot smashed against The Feathered Fiend's head. In a tangle of feathers, the man groaned and collapsed. He did not move anymore.

Pete and Jupiter were breathing heavily. Immediately they examined their opponent, but he had obviously not seriously injured himself. His breathing was shallow, but steady and even, just like his pulse. Pete found several pieces of rope and both of them tied the bird-man's hands and feet.

Jupiter finally pulled the mask off their defeated opponent's face. They had never seen the man before, but they recognized his hairstyle from Bob's description. The man with the dreadlocks had to be Timothy Jackson—the owner of the best comic book store in all of Southern California.

Pete then used his mobile phone—now with reception—to call not only the police, but also an ambulance. Soon, the authorities came and took care of the criminal. Even though the two investigators gave their statements, the police had to wait for Mr Faring, who was returning to his house with Bob and Barbara. This was conveyed to Jupe in his brief phone call to Bob.

While waiting for the three of them to return, Pete and Jupe sunk down onto the sofa in Mr Faring's living room and sighed with relief.

Then Pete turned to Jupiter and said: "Okay, you saved us with your shredding action and gave The Feathered Fiend the fright of his life—but let's face it, Jupe, that comic book cost Mr Faring \$350,000! Three hundred and fifty thousand dollars!"

Jupiter grinned. "So what? It still is."

"But you tore it up!" Pete exclaimed.

"Did I?" Jupe countered. "Actually, I tore up Bob's reprint."

"You what?"

“I tore up the worthless reprint,” Jupe repeated. “What do you think? It was just fifteen dollars’ worth of damage. I think Bob will forgive me.”

“Let me guess... you made a switch?” Pete asked.

“Yes,” Jupe affirmed. “I put the original back into the secret compartment, and the reprint into the black case.”

The two laughed in relief.

Very soon, The Three Investigators were reunited when Bob and Barbara returned from Los Angeles with Mr Faring. The story with Barbara’s gun had been quickly cleared up.

Now everyone was sitting together in Mr Faring’s living room, which had taken quite a beating in the course of this case—a destroyed aquarium, water damage, a smashed window, a kicked-in basement door... but none of this seemed to bother Mr Faring in the least. He looked very pleased sitting there in the armchair with the Mylar bag containing the precious original comic book resting on his lap.

“I can’t thank you guys enough. Without your help, none of this would have turned out so smoothly.”

“I am disturbed, however, sir,” Jupiter said, “that some minor questions have so far remained unanswered...”

“And what would that be?” Mr Faring asked.

“One in particular was how did The Feathered Fiend able to enter your house in the first place, when it is so well secured.”

“I asked my captors that same question,” Mr Faring said, “and this Timothy Jackson was in such a good mood that he even told me how. That was just after you called him, Bob, where he lured you away so that he could come here undisturbed to look for the comic book. He left his two helpers behind—one to guard me, and the other to intercept you and Barbara.” He looked at them both regretfully. “But back to your question, Jupiter—it’s amazingly simple, and I wonder how I could have been so stupid. Thomas Malone at the aquarium service has all the keys, so he can service the aquarium on a regular schedule.”

“So he’s in on it too?” Pete asked.

“Why, no! Thomas is trustworthy, but he didn’t guard the keys very well. Jackson broke into his place, got a print of the keys, and made copies. That’s not so easy to do with security locks like mine. It costs quite a bit, but it wasn’t really a problem for him.”

“Who engaged him to get the comic book anyway?” asked Jupiter.

“No one, as far as I know. Jackson was sure, though, that he could sell it again very profitably, thanks to his contacts. This time not with a public auction, but under the table.”

Barbara laughed. “I guess this fake comic book character won’t be able to do that now.”

“Certainly not!” Zachariah Faring held up the \$350,000 comic book. “But I guess I’ll have to find another hiding place for this showpiece of my collection...”